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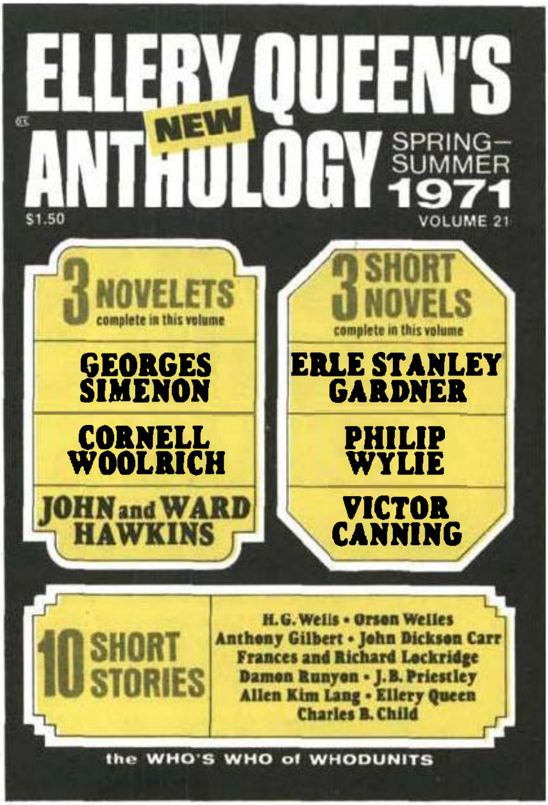
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POINT OF NO RETURN

by URSULA CURTISS

IT WAS SO ASTONISHINGLY fast and simple that for a few moments Roger Corbin could scarcely believe it. He had brought about the most tremendous of all changes—the transition from life to death—and it had been almost like slapping shut a book in a fit of boredom. But then Vera's thin faded-blonde hair had obviously covered a thin skull.

The goldfish in their tank saw everything, and after a quick molten scurry they resumed their tranquil flickering through painted china arches and clusters of imitation white coral. They, and much later an unseen kitten at the edge of a dark field, were the only witnesses to the final disposal of Vera Corbin, and neither would ever speak . . .

In the morning, the face in the bathroom mirror certainly did not look like that of a wife-killer's. The really sinister husbands—or so Roger Corbin had come to believe through novels and television—were the meek and rabbity kind, or the smooth and too-handsome, or the saintly pillars of the community.

He fitted into none of these categories. At a vigorous 53, his

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big hard body and tanned square-jawed face under the close-cut gray hair were testimonials to his liking for the outdoors. Women, looking at the jaw, sometimes suspected a temper there, but they suspected it in the mysteriously intrigued and admiring way in which women often notice failings in any husband other than their own. Men were dryly amused at Roger's caution with his money—his luncheon companions usually left a surreptitious additional tip—but they liked his easy outspoken air and respected his shrewdness.

Less was known about Roger's wife, who spent a good deal of her time making complicated casseroles and polishing her ivy, but on the surface at least the Corbins had a reasonably normal twenty-five-year marriage. It was true that Vera, like many small excitable women, had been known to rush off in a huff for a week or so at a time, but this was regarded as a kind of substitute for bowling or ping-pong.

As a result, no one at the office was surprised when Roger let it drop in a half-annoyed, half-humorous way that he wished his wife would get over her current fit of pique and come home again. Howard Cooper and Dennis Thorne, married colleagues who prudently wanted no details of a domestic upset, merely raised their eyebrows and shook their heads noncommittally. It was left to doting Miss Wegby, Roger's secretary, to register her sympathy and indignation by a number of moist warm glances and, the very next morning, by a yellow rosebud from her mother's garden.

Miss Wegby might have been designed by a committee of jealous wives. Although only in her late twenties she had the overbosomed, broad-hipped figure of a matron twice her age. She was asthmatic and near-sighted, and in vain she administered layers of powder to her gleaming and earnest face, a practice which someone had unkindly likened to hiding her light under a bushel. But she was an expert shorthand typist, devoted and passionately loyal—she frequently took work home with her—and she was more comforting to Roger Corbin at this juncture of his life than any houri. Because hadn't someone said that no one knew a man as well as his secretary? And here was Miss Wegby bringing him boutonnieres, and Danish pastry for his mid-morning coffee—"You can't be eating properly, Mr. Corbin"—and generally cherishing him to the top of her bent.

She need not have worried about Roger's meals. He did think a little wistfully about Vera's casseroles—for a woman of almost no imagination she had been an extremely good cook—but the freezer was well-stocked and his appetite had never faltered. He would return to the silent house at 5:30, set his dinner preparations in train, feed the knowledgeable goldfish with a steady hand, and settle down comfortably with a drink and the newspaper. Half-hearted dinner invitations had been conveyed through their husbands by Mrs. Cooper and Mrs. Thorne, but Roger had declined. "I'd better be at home, just in case . . ."

Far from getting on his nerves, the empty house delighted him: it had somewhat the quality of a finally stilled faucet. Not that he took any liberties with the housekeeping: he was fully as property-minded as Vera had been, and used coasters and place mats and ashtrays with care. The cleaning woman had made her weekly visit, and a half hour every evening with dustcloth and mop kept the place almost as gleaming as when Vera had been in residence.

When eight days had gone by, he invited young Derek Bingham, the only unmarried man in the office, for dinner; he had done this before in temporary bachelorhood and it was important to keep to the pattern. More than that, it was time to plant the first suggestion. Over an after-dinner beer, gazing pensively at the hearth where Vera had fallen after her head was sent crashing back against the stone edge of the mantel, he mused like a man thinking aloud. "Maybe we ought to get away more, weekends. Vera and I," he explained to Bingham's somewhat baffled face; they had been talking about Vietnam a moment before. "Maybe that's what's been the trouble."

Bingham looked uncomfortable, and studied his beer as attentively as though it had just spoken to him.

"Oh, no real trouble—good lord, you don't throw twenty-five years out the window," said Roger with too much cheerfulness and too much confidence. He brooded. "I guess the damn columnists are right and a woman gets feeling taken for granted. I thought she was all wrapped up in the house"—his gaze swept over the textured lemon carpeting, the gleams of mahogany, the pictures selected to match the slipcovers—"but . . . well." He slapped the arms of his chair decisively and made a wry face.

"Those are deep waters, and you haven't even got your feet wet yet. Don't let it put you off that very pretty girl I saw you with at lunch today. How about another beer?"

Predictably, Bingham fled.

The first move had been made.

If Roger should presently announce tidings of a divorce, who would gainsay him? Not family; Vera's widowed mother had died ten years before and Vera had quarreled bitterly with some cousins who had sheltered the old lady and been remembered in the modest will. They had received the money and Vera had inherited two paltry lots in a slum section of Newark, New Jersey, and since then there had never been so much as an exchange of Christmas cards.

Close friends were not a hazard, because Vera had had none. After their eleven months here Roger was far better known than she, and if he did not raise a hue and cry, who would? It was not as though he intended to remarry; Vera had cured him of that. Neither were there any financial considerations. They had a joint checking account, but at some future and judicious time he would simply change banks. Although he and Vera had made out mutual wills at the time of their marriage, unrevoked through the years of corrosive dislike, he wasn't losing anything there. To any questions he would merely say—and it must often happen this way—that his wife had severed all communication with him and he had no idea where she was to be found.

. . . Found.

Unlikely, in the newly plowed field ready for planting two miles away. Roger did not even know the owner, which seemed in itself a safeguard. As for Vera's old green Volkswagen, driven deep into the trees along a ditch-bank and containing the suitcase she had packed so furiously with her own hands—the car was far more likely to be stripped, in that area, than reported to the police.

And if it were reported? One more case of a woman foolish enough to have picked up a hitchhiker, or to have driven at night with the passenger door unlocked. Volkswagen and body were well over a mile apart, but surely the police would waste considerable time in dragging the obvious place, the ditch. They could investigate the house and Roger to their hearts' content. There had been surprisingly little blood on the hearth where Vera had stood and said the one unforgivable thing, and he was confident that his own small-hours' scrubbing, the cleaning woman's ministrations, and several open fires had taken care of that. As to his own life, the deepest probing could not produce any indication of monetary gain or any interest in another woman, because neither existed.

And there were certainly no witnesses to the growingly acid domestic scenes, the peculiar deadlock about divorce although there had been no religious barrier. In Vera's world divorced women were subtly disgraced—and in a community-property state Roger was grimly determined not to part with half the reward of his thirty years' work. They were bound forever by their wall-to-wall carpeting and copper-colored kitchen appliances and Vera's philosophy of life, of which perhaps the high point was an insistence on cloth napkins instead of paper.

Why, the police would have to ask themselves, would a husband of 25 years suddenly not be able to stand it a single moment longer?

Roger had once read somewhere that by tracing a finger gently and unceasingly over the same place on the skin it was possible to produce bleeding. Vera had done that, only at the end she had not used a gentle finger but the sharpest kind of knife . . .

Roger Corbin was an only child, his father dead before he was born. Marguerite Corbin was an attractive and ambitious woman who found her adoring son an asset until he was 25 and a distinct liability thereafter. Was this great and prematurely graying creature to contradict her punishing diets, her facials, her cunning hair tints? She found Vera Beasly, and said to Roger in her fluttery voice, "Darling, it isn't *right* of me to monopolize your life—it's the kind of thing that gives mothers a bad name. I would like to see you settled down, you know, perhaps in the kind of home where"—she smiled at him bravely—"I might some day be welcome now and then."

A little bewildered, frightened at his mother's mysterious air of courage, Roger had married Vera, small and energetic and blonde. Mrs. Corbin, unencumbered, presently went off with a dubiously titled Italian and sank, along with all hands, on his yacht off the coast of Sicily.

Vera was all twitters and comfort, and alluded only three or four times to the fact that, far from leaving an estate, Mrs. Corbin had bequeathed them a few debts. She took a course in shorthand and typing, got a job in a wholesale drug house, and at the end of five years was office manager. The rise to this position was reflected at home in a new and critical crispness, a sharper eye on time-wasting habits like a late Saturday-morning sleep. Roger, beginning to make a respectable income, was also beginning to feel like an erring typist. He insisted that Vera give up her job.

A mistake? Possibly, because her new aggressiveness was now unleashed at home. On the other hand, she had been well on the way to becoming a small female dictator, with "absenteeism" and "waste motion" routine parts of her conversation. Deprived of a public outlet for her energy, she sat back triumphantly to see just how well Roger was going to provide for them, and the fact that he did so with increasing success seemed to gall her.

At the end of ten years there were no children, a fact at which Roger was by now obscurely relieved. Vera was less reticent, but for a different reason. "There's so much in heredity, and, well, we know about my people but we don't know a thing about your father, do we? I mean, perhaps it's just as well . . ."

This carried a deep sting which Roger was careful not to let his wife see. As a child he had asked the usual questions about his father, only to be confronted by a pretty little handkerchief applied to his mother's eyes. "My treasure mustn't ask me about that. Such a wonderful man, such a tragedy—oh, I simply can't talk about it!" Once she indicated that his father had pined away of tuberculosis; on another and forgetful occasion Mrs. Corbin mentioned a fire in a theater where he had given his life to save women and children. Long before her death Roger had accepted the strong possibility that he was illegitimate.

Far from undermining his devotion to his mother's memory, the delicate insinuations about any irregularity in her marital status only deepened Roger's dislike of Vera, already well begun. If it had become hatred at that point, or even if Vera, perversely, had not been such an excellent manager, the marriage might have come to a quiet and bloodless end. But his aversion was still like a familiar but scratchy sweater—nothing to make a man rip the garment off—and in Vera's careful hands their net worth was becoming very comfortable.

So the point of no return was reached, unnoticed, and passed. The negative aspects of their marriage were in a curious way as binding as their possessions. Vera could not complain that Roger drank to excess or abused her physically or gambled or ran around with other women; indeed, he did not even run around with her, and this formed the basis for her furious little departures. To her querulous demands as to why they could not go away occasionally for a vacation—even a weekend at some nice resort—Roger merely answered implacably that he was going fishing or hunting instead; surely it had penetrated even her head that some kind of physical exercise was considered imperative for men of his age?

It was incredible to him that she should seriously expect him to spend time and effort and money to closet himself in a strange place with a woman who was only and barely tolerable in seeing to his comforts at home. And because it was so very obvious he never bothered to say it.

For his part Roger could not point to any neglect of the house, or any frittering away of money. Nor had Vera let herself go. At 49 she was nothing more than plump and well-girdled, and she dressed with fussy care—so much so that no collar or pocket or waistline ever suited her, but had to be smoothed and plucked and tugged at with office-manager firmness. Apart from two small deep vertical lines between her eyebrows, her skin was still almost girlish; her blonde hair, although faded, was carefully curled. It was a tribute to the Corbins' peculiar expertise and perhaps to their surroundings that, on the rare occasions when they entertained, Vera's wifely little sharpnesses and Roger's sardonic retorts made them seem all the more solidly and comfortably married.

On that evening eight days before, up until the very last seconds, they would not have had the appearance of killer and victim . . .

It had not been a good day at Slade Enterprises where Roger worked. At 4:30 he even had occasion to snap at the usually faultless Miss Wegby. Arriving at the foot of his driveway at 5:30, in the moodiness that springs from remorse, he discovered that Vera had failed to bring in the newspaper and that it had been run over by some vehicle with disastrous results. He had backed and swerved with grim speed and driven to the nearest store; returning at 6:00 with an edition from which the owners of the store had torn the pages containing their own and their competitors' ads, he was informed by Vera that dinner would be ready in a matter of minutes.

Roger's blood pressure had slid up a notch. For the last several weeks, in her disapproval at the fact that his pre-dinner Scotches were gradually creeping from two to three, Vera had been stealthily advancing the dinner hour. "Well, *I* won't be ready in-a-matter-of-minutes," he had said shortly, mimicking her briskness. "After having to go nearly back to town to get the blasted paper I'm going to have a drink in peace."

Vera's brows went up at his use of the singular, but she only said, "I'll do what I can with the chicken hash"—in a tone implying that she would put down some kind of insurrection—and departed for the kitchen.

She was back almost at once, her arms folded militantly. When Roger did not glance up from his mutilated newspaper she said in a high bright voice, "I'm sorry about the paper, it must have been the dishwasher repairman. It broke down this morning and I called them at once, and of *course* he didn't come until mid-afternoon and of *course* he didn't have the proper part on the truck and of *course* it was too late by then for him to go back to the shop and get it. All this charming manana!" finished Vera with biting scorn. "Why, I wonder, is it considered so charming to be lazy and late about everything but the bill?"

All, so far, had gone largely according to pattern except that they were both a little more tense than usual. The finger-snapping, efficiency-watching Vera simply did not fit into this leisurely suburb, reflected Roger, forgetting his own temper at delay, and periodically she went off into these diatribes. "If this is a prelude to suggesting that we move back East, forget it," he said, walking to the kitchen to make his second drink. "We've got a lot of money invested in this place. My God, look what you've got here!"

His gaze swept appreciatively over hanging ivy and copper and stainless steel. "I have looked. A broken dishwasher," said Vera, prim and icy.

The quarrel, although it was hardly more than routine procedure, continued through dinner and after. Both said what they had said a hundred times before, and Vera's face acquired a mottled flush; she was not a woman, if such a woman existed, whom anger became. They had reached the familiar point of, "If you're so bent on going away, why don't you? Nobody's stopping you," and "All right, that's exactly what I will do!" when Vera added something new. Flinging a sponge dramatically into the spotless sink, wheeling to pass him, she said with quiet deadliness, "Do you know something, Roger? I'm sure nobody at the office would dare tell you, but you are getting *very odd.*"

On that she had departed for the bedroom. Thump, click, rustle: she was packing like a wet hen, until the ultimate respectability of a husband should appeal to her again. Roger interjected a fresh note of his own, shouting through the closed door, "Do me a favor and take a lot of clothes with you. Along with your bank book."

In one sense this savings account was a thorn in his flesh as it was solely in Vera's name and not subject to the community-property law, representing income from the New Jersey lots left to her by her mother. On the other hand, it financed these little expeditions of hers.

Ostentatiously, while the sounds of preparation went on in the bedroom, he finished his coffee, consulted the paper, switched on the television set. He was the picture of unconcerned comfort when there was a suitcase-sounding thump in the entrance hall and Vera, gray-suited, wearing a small black-and-white hat and black pumps, stalked past him across the lemon carpeting to the mantelpiece.

"I'm leaving Mrs. Tafoya's key here. If you want her to clean on Thursday, put it under the middle pot of ivy outside the front door."

"What . . .? Oh, the middle pot. Right," said Roger, gazing sedulously at the television screen. Vera, one white glove on, was now smoothing on the other with the tiny interminable pushings that accompanied this act. Her anger was almost as visible in the room as a shimmer of heat. "Shall I tell you something else, Roger?"

"Do. I have always lacked the Beasly culture, and stand ready to be instructed. I have never," said Roger—Vera's father had owned a small feed-and-grain store—"quite understood the difference between chick feed and mash."

He was on his feet—polite, receptive. Vera's face hardened and she lifted her head. "I've finally figured out why your mother never told you about your father. She obviously didn't know who he was—don't you *dare* touch me, Roger Corbin, don't you dare lay a fing—"

That was when the goldfish began their molten scurry . . .

Barring any immediate family or close friends to make an outcry, people were, Roger discovered, rather easily lost. Now that he paid attention to the subject, the newspapers seemed full of tiny casual items about bones stumbled across by hunters or picnickers or exploring children.

Vera's mail, for instance, presented no problem. Advertisements from local stores, a card advising Vera that her dentist had moved his office to a new address, a darkly worded statement that two library books were overdue. Roger found and returned the books and paid the fine to a high-school girl he had never seen before.

The way now seemed clear, particularly as young Bingham could testify to his presentiments, for a rueful announcement that he had heard from Vera in Reno and she meant it after all: she was divorcing him. "Twenty-five years," he would repeat, shaking his head unbelievingly, but he knew from experience that his acquaintances would shy away from details and his secretary think him the most wronged of men.

It was the sheerest accident that he did not carry out this plan. Returning uncustomarily to the house at noon one day because he had forgotten his reading glasses and automatically scooping the mail from the box, he took a cursory look before he left. Mortgage payment, electric light bill, a political circular—and a letter, airmailed, for Mrs. Vera B. Corbin from Paget & Maybank, the Newark attorneys who handled the rental property.

A thorough scrutiny with the letter held against the light told Roger nothing except that there was no check enclosed. But in this climate envelopes came unstuck with ease, and with only a little coaxing this one did. In his speculation over the lack of people who might make pressing inquiries about Vera he had forgotten all about this area of her life, and the omission frightened him; his fingers were trembling as he unfolded the single stiff white sheet.

And learned that the two insignificant lots had stood in the way of a new bank building and parking lot under an urban renewal plan. Thanks to Vera's already-sent power of attorney, the sale had been consummated for $50,000.

Roger did not dare take the

afternoon off—it was something he had never done before—but he looked at production records and signed the morning's dictation in a daze of rage and bewilderment. $50,000! How could such a thing possibly—? But of course it was Vera who visited the mailbox on weekdays and she had simply sequestered everything that had to do with the sale of the lots. Business-minded, she knew very well that this windfall did not come under the community-property law, and she had kept the earlier bargaining stages secret.

What else—*who* else—might there be that he did not know about or hadn't thought of?

Back in the house at 5:30, the house that might be teeming with destructive forces, Roger did not even pause to make a drink but commenced a search at once. He spent very little time at the desk where Vera had paid the household bills and written letters and Christmas cards; she would have kept nothing clandestine there. The bedroom? That was the obvious place—or no, it wasn't. The kitchen.

The letters from Paget & Maybank, four of them in a period of more than a year, were curled neatly in the innermost of a nest of cannisters in the cupboard under the sinks. Besides being lodged behind an almost impenetrable barrier of frying pans and chafing dishes, the cannisters were vessels Roger would never use no matter how long he cooked for himself.

On the heels of panic came a kind of appalled fury at Vera. It was safe now to pause for a drink, but clearly she could not be trusted one inch. By midnight, however, with three more drinks and a gulped-down hamburger along the way, he had searched the house so thoroughly that he was confident there were no more secrets.

Today's letter no longer frightened him in itself; it asked no questions and did not even require an acknowledgment. And four communications in over a year did not suggest that Paget & Maybank were feverishly preoccupied with the affairs of Vera B. Corbin. As they had her power of attorney, it might and probably would be months before they instituted any inquiry as to the whereabouts of their client. Months before Vera was found dead and her will became effective and $50,000 passed into Roger's bereaved hands.

He snatched his mind from that thought as he would have snatched his hand from a high-tension wire.

But it came back, and with it, like the frill on a lamb chop, came the idea of triumph over Vera. But first—and Roger shuddered when he recalled how close he had come to announcing that he had heard from her in Reno—first he must consider the risks.

Provided that Vera were disinterred quite soon, the date of her death could be established to have been substantially earlier than the glad tidings from Paget & Maybank, so there was no real problem of motive on his part. As to the actual disposal of her body—unflinchingly, he sent his mind back.

A small woman, she had fitted quite easily into the back seat of her Volkswagen. It hadn't been late—not much after 9:00—but he had been met by very few oncoming cars and, in that quiet area of alfalfa fields and tiny adobe houses, had been passed by only one. The headlights had died around a curve; he had sat tensely in the Volkswagen to make very sure of that before pulling in at the edge of the plowed field.

The mewing kitten? A dog would have worried him, with the vision of someone at the end of a leash, but people here did not walk cats. On the contrary, they abandoned unwanted ones.

It had taken a surprisingly long time to dig deep enough, even in the loose earth, and more time to fill in, moving backward on hands and knees and raking roughly with his fingers so that the earth should not look tamped down. In the dark he could only guess at his success. Then off to the ditch a mile away, the green Volkswagen driven deep into green, and this time there were no headlights at all and almost no house lights showing. It had been a long walk home, again without encounter.

The car. That was the safe and indirect way. Arrange to have the car reported, so that the police would come to him with the initial disadvantage of having to deliver gravely disturbing news. An abandoned car, a suitcase packed as only a woman could pack it, the ditch . . .

In the morning Roger cruised by the ditch, gazing with an informed eye through the mask of tamarisks and cottonwoods. The Volkswagen didn't seem to be there, oddly, although even by night he could not have been mistaken—

Dangling binoculars casually, he left his car, pushed his way through undergrowth, gazed disbelievingly at heavy tire tracks in the sandy soil. At the time he had thought complacently that the Volkswagen would be stripped of its tires and battery and possibly even its engine, and that there would be a juvenile conspiracy not to report the car to the authorities.

But they had taken, or towed, the car itself—the whole car. And with it Vera's suitcase, the tangible argument that she had left her home of her own volition. Car theft thrived in this locality; the Volkswagen, its engine number filed off, was probably spray-painted behind somebody's house.

But the suitcase: what had they done with that? Combed it for valuables, emptied it into the ditch? *That* was a sweat-producing thought; although there were no edible fish to be caught, little boys might well be out with rods, perhaps hooking a blouse or a slip, running proudly home: "Look, Mom!"

With the vanishing of the car Roger was a man reduced to a course he distrusted and feared, and on too-short notice—but the $50,000 beckoned, and there was now the threat of premature discovery as well. He would have to do what countless men before him had done: humble himself before the police, tell them that his wife had left him after a quarrel, and that he feared for her safety.

He would do it from his office. Calling about such a matter from such a place would have an open, aboveboard. nothing-to-hide air . . .

He was spared the trouble. His detour, plus a wild sand-ridden wind that made driving slow and parking lights necessary, brought him to Slade Enterprises late. When he entered his office, Miss Wegby, spectacularly sallow in maroon, was apparently bidding good-bye to a man in a deputy sheriff's uniform.

"Oh, Mr. Corbin, you're just in time," she cried asthmatically. "I know this gentleman is only doing his duty, but it's so ridiculous! I've just told him that Mrs. Corbin was in yesterday after closing hours to pick up the money for her trip."

The room took a small lurch before Roger Corbin's eyes. He made himself look directly at the deputy. "I'm afraid I don't understand. Has there been some question . . .?"

"You know how it is," said the deputy ruefully; he studied his shoes with embarrassment. "New administration, new broom. We get a call from some catty female to see is your wife all present and accounted for, and we have to check it out. I tell you, we get all kinds.

Well—" He touched his wide-brimmed hat. "I wish they were all as easy as this. Morning, ma'am . . . Mr. Corbin."

Roger could not move at once; an abyss so deep and black that he could not even begin to see the bottom of it had just opened up in front of him.

Loyal Miss Wegby. Snapped at on the day that mattered, rushing over to his house in her car with the missing report, seeing him depart with Vera's body. Passing him on that dark quiet road, stopping at a careful distance, coming back.

Watching.

She was eyeing him steadily now. Vast-bosomed, broad-hipped, sallow, asthmatic, she was giving him a look which contained far more than secretarial devotion—a look of yearning love. Because of the high winds and her asthma, her breath made little mewing sounds, like an unseen kitten at the edge of a dark field . . .

a *NEW* detective story by

LAWRENCE TREAT

Mushrooms—as a modus operandi for murder they have been used often in detective stories. But perhaps no story of the past—no short story—has explored the relationship between mycology and murder as thoroughly as this newest one from Lawrence Treat. If you like mushrooms—well, be careful . . .

THE MUSHROOM FANCIERS

by LAWRENCE TREAT

ELLA . . .

We all know her, here in Enderby Village. She's a warm, plump, earthy creature of broken teeth and broken English. We trust her and love her, most of us, and we wonder, all of us, what she lives on.

A pension of some kind. Cora Prichard and Martha, my wife, agree on that much, but however small the amount, Ella gets along well enough. She lives rent-free in that backwoods cabin of the Prichards', and all summer long she survives on what she finds in the forest. By way of gratitude she makes periodic gifts of wild mushrooms—on which subject she is an acknowledged authority.

I'll never forget the first time she came to our house. She'd brought a bucket of mushrooms to our back door just as Martha happened to step outside. Ella offered the lot.

"You like?" she said.

Martha is not only beautiful and loyal and intelligent, but she's polite, and she was far too polite to offend an old woman. Nevertheless, she had no intention of eating any part of that assorted heap of brown, white, and yellow poison, no matter how luscious it looked or how redolent it smelled. But Ella, who has a peasant's insight, would have nothing of Martha's politeness.

"Okee," Ella said. "I cook, we eat." And she stormed into the kitchen, which was where I found them.

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I fell in love with Ella on sight, for there was something so real and warm and peasanty about her that I couldn't resist. She knew how to laugh and she knew how to forgive, and she saw right through both Martha and me, who were scared of those mushrooms. So Ella took one of them out of the pan where she was sautéing them and she cut the mushroom into three parts. One part for Martha, one for me, and one for herself. And she popped hers into her mouth.

It was the time-honored way of assuring a guest that you're not trying to poison him. And Ella, there in our brand-new kitchen, acted the part of the hostess putting us at ease. I reacted by getting a bottle of wine, our best, and the three of us sat down and finished both the bottle and the mushrooms. As I recall, we had some meadow mushrooms and some oyster mushrooms, and some of the smaller puffballs. After that we were good friends.

A few days later Martha took up the study of mushrooms, which I found out is called mycology, and when Martha does something she does it thoroughly. She bought all the standard texts on fungi and she boned up on their characteristics. She could spot a "destroying angel" at 50 feet and, as a matter of precaution, she turned her back on all the amanitas. She took long hikes into forest and field. I went with her whenever I had the time, and we usually returned with full baskets.

At home, Martha studied the specimens we'd found. She felt them, sliced them, photographed them, and put them under a water glass and left them there overnight to deposit their spore patterns. She talked about identifying specimens from their veils and gills and pores and caps; she delighted in morels and polypores and boletes; and she went mushrooming with Ella and combined field work with scientific analysis.

In other words, Martha became something of a mycologist, and if she'd been at that fateful party of the Prichards', she would have known at once and nothing would have happened. But unfortunately she'd gone to visit her mother in California and was there for two weeks.

Martha's interest in mushrooms was contagious, and as can happen in a small community like the Bluebird Road area, the fashion quickly spread. The Prichards and Enderbys and Eilers and all the rest of them dealt with Ella. They wanted to pay her for her wild mushrooms, but Ella always refused.

"Is my benefit," she would say, meaning that she was glad to oblige. And she brought morels, campestras and ceps and chanterelles and chicken of the woods *(Polyporus sulphureus*, Martha insists on calling them) to every house. There developed a kind of gourmet competition in wild-mushroom cookery. Whenever Ella brought someone a large enough supply there was a party. We had our mushrooms sautéed and broiled and stuffed, as well as in mushroom spreads; we had quenelles; we had mushrooms prepared in sour cream and cooked in chafing dishes and marinated and pickled and even raw. The varieties seemed to be endless, and Cora Prichard, having once written a cookbook, felt constrained to lead all the rest.

Martha and I were new in the community, and were and are very much in love. How we happened to get in with the Bluebird Road crowd was a matter of sheer chance. We really weren't in their class. We didn't have their money, their social background, or their lack of morals. In the course of time we found out more or less who was bedding up with whom, and we heard rumors of involvement in corruption, embezzlement, and fraud. Still, they were only rumors—until Malcolm documented them.

Malcolm was the Prichard butler, and he had apparently been steaming open envelopes and listening in on phone extensions for years, and recording it all for future use. I never liked him, nor did he like me. I'm convinced that he investigated me and decided I wasn't worthwhile. I slept only with my own wife, I'd committed no known crimes, and I didn't insult people—which put me down as a complete nobody in Malcolm's book.

Literally. Because he had a book, or at least the manuscript thereof. The title was *Memoirs of a Corrupt Family*, and he apparently had all the residents of Bluebird Road tagged. But he must have had talent, too, because a well-known publisher was all set to buy the book and had offered him a $5000 advance, subject merely to their legal department clearing the text for libel.

The legal department, however, would have none of it, and word reached the Attorney General. He'd been a guest in several of the big houses on Bluebird Road and he tried to sit tight on the whole affair, but found it impossible. Regretfully he informed his friends that there was no way to prevent what he referred to as an undesirable investigation. He remarked casually that in ten days' time he had an appointment with Malcolm, who would be the key witness and had promised to produce proof.

In one way or another Martha and I picked up most of this gossip, and we realized that Malcolm was in grave danger. He had the same idea and he appealed to the police for protection. The result was Detective John Vesey. He arrived a week before Malcolm's scheduled interview with the Attorney General.

Vesey's assignment was a difficult one. Not that he was ill at ease in our local society. He wasn't. He could wear black tie or Ivy League clothes as naturally as any Enderby, and he did. But Vesey must have been aware that the attack on Malcolm, if it came, would be made with the finesse and ingenuity of a Medici. And to defend against it would require considerable perspicacity on Vesey's part.

He didn't look perspicacious. He was a tall, lanky, easy-going guy, and he flirted like the devil with Cora Prichard. Maybe that was part of his job, but if so, he sure overdid it. For Cora was attractive and she knew how to run a love affair right under her husband's nose. She'd had plenty of experience.

Then one day Cora found a couple of fine specimens of *Polyporus sulphureus*, that gigantic bright-colored fungus that can measure a foot or two across and looks like a pile of freshly ironed, ruffle-edged doilies just come from the laundry. And tastes delicious. Naturally, after checking up on their identity, Cora celebrated her find with a party, and that's what this story is about.

"I found two of them," she said to me over the phone. "Isn't that wonderful? We're going to eat one, and the other we'll just look at and admire. Can you come at seven?"

"Delighted," I said, sorry that Martha was away and would miss the party.

The Prichard estate is a large one, complete with an artificial lake containing an island which is just a few feet from shore and is reached by an arched stone bridge. Cora gives her parties on the island.

Most of the island is occupied by what she calls a "pleasure house," and what other people call a pavilion. She visited Japan in her youth and never got over it, and her pleasure house is Japanese in style. It has an expensive porch where cocktails are served and where at least a dozen people can lounge comfortably. From there you reach the dining area and a galley, to which food from the house is brought and where it can be kept hot. In addition to the galley, Prichard, who fancies himself as an outdoor cook, has installed a grill for charcoal cooking.

A couple of Japanese gardeners landscaped the island. Although the pavilion has left not much more than a rim of earth to be landscaped, they have arranged it tastefully, with bonsais and carefully selected rocks.

On the afternoon of the party the gardeners had been working on a corner of the island. Rather than carry their top soil and peat moss over the bridge, they had a plank from shore to island. The plank, just out of sight of the bridge, was about fifteen feet long and barely a foot wide. Cora was telling how the Japanese had brought over their material on a wheelbarrow.

"Such a sense of balance!" she said. "You should have seen them—they're so sure-footed." And she smiled and moved her blonde head just enough for her huge gold-wire earrings to make a faint tinkling sound.

Cora enjoyed her parties. They stimulated her and made her chattery. Although she wasn't clever, she thought she was and the excitement made her eyes flash with blue fire. And, caught up in the thrill of her own exalted fancy, she dressed daringly.

I was part of the circle attracted equally by her high spirits and her low neckline. Lennie Eiler and Ed Broome were there, too. Lennie plays squash every day and sometimes even finds time to stop in for mail at what he calls his office. Ed Broome, dark and saturnine, is a more serious type, but the pair of them along with Peter Prichard, who was standing at the other side of the room and examining the hors d'oeuvres, were reputed to be the major targets of Malcolm's book. Which is another way of saying that all three of them had excellent reasons for muting Malcolm permanently.

Cora, however, was off and running about her Japanese gardeners. "They're experts on mushrooms, too," she said. "They told me the best mushrooms come from Japan, and they're going to send me some samples. Dried, of course."

"Don't they like ours?" Lennie asked.

"Oh, yes. While I was talking to them Ella came in with a whole bucketful. We're going to have them tonight, too, and the gardeners tasted them right from the bucket. 'Very good,' they both said, and they nodded. Like this." Cora, with mock seriousness, nodded, chiefly to make her earrings tinkle again.

"What kind are they?" Ed Broome asked.

"They're the squishy kind," Cora answered. "I never can remember names. Peter!" She called out to her husband, who had completed his analysis of the hors d'oeuvres. "Peter, what kind did Ella bring this afternoon?"

"I didn't know she'd brought any," he said, approaching her.

"They're the same kind we had a week ago Saturday, when the Davidsons were here. We're having them tonight, along with my *Polyporus.*"

Peter Prichard, dignified and erudite, answered by giving the scientific name. "*Coprinus atramentarius,*" he said. "How are they being prepared?"

"That new recipe of mine," Cora said. "I was working on it and tasting all afternoon. You make a paste, but you start with onions and—" She broke off in laughter. "But I'm not going to give away my secrets in public."

I turned away, and as I did so, I noticed Prichard's expression. He was licking his lips and frowning, like a man who'd just heard some important news and was trying to decide how to handle it. I remember thinking that people can make an awful lot of fuss over a few mushrooms.

Still, the *Polyporus* was worth it. We were due to eat one of them, but the other stood on a small table, with a spotlight focused on the center. It was a beautiful specimen, a bright orangy-yellow, about a foot across and some five inches high. Behind it was Cora's favorite painting, a picture of three white cats done by a Japanese artist.

Cora loves cats. Her current favorite, a long-haired white Persian named Miss Underfoot, came parading across the room. As I watched, she leaped up on the sideboard and then, without hesitating, jumped onto the narrow ledge above it where Cora kept a pair of rare and beautiful vases. The cat squeezed past without touching them and then settled down on the ledge, as if presenting herself as an object of art and asking us to judge which was the lovelier—she or the vases.

Cora waved to some of her guests who were just arriving, and I saw that Vesey was left with Prichard and Eiler and Broome. I stayed within earshot and wondered how they'd handle the situation—a police detective at a party with the three men he'd been assigned to watch.

I could, however, notice no strain. They spoke casually of Wall Street prices and of yesterday's tennis matches. If I expected them to trade veiled insults and to slip an innuendo into every remark, I was disappointed. All three of them acted matter-of-fact, civilized, and rather dull.

Vesey left them a couple of minutes later, and I saw Prichard whisper something to the other two. They nodded and moved off into a corner. There, after a whispered conference, each of them took out a coin. Their expressions were somber as they tossed, in the ancient game of "odd man out." It crossed my mind that they were tossing to decide who would dispose of Vesey. The idea, however, was ridiculous.

Malcolm, wheeling in a lacquered tea wagon with drinks, spoke to me.

"May I serve you, sir?"

There was Scotch, bourbon, and the makings of a martini on the top platform, and I picked bourbon on the rocks. This was a drinking crowd, and he made mine strong.

I studied him while he made my drink. He was as unlikely an author as you could find. He retained the silky, subservient manner of the born lackey, and he'd aged perceptibly since I'd seen him a few weeks before. His cheeks were sunken and his eyes looked feverish.

"Malcolm," I said, "how are you these days?"

"Badly, sir," he said in a low tired voice. "I shouldn't be here."

"Then why don't you leave? Go to town and stay at a hotel."

"Me?" he said in surprise. "I couldn't. I belong here. Mrs. Prichard needs me." He handed me my glass. "Your drink, sir."

"Thanks," I said. "You don't look at all well."

"I'm under a great strain, sir. I fear for my very life."

"I don't understand you," I said. "Or anyone else around here."

"Perhaps not," he said, and wheeled the tea wagon toward Prichard.

I watched the pantomime of the butler asking his boss what he wanted, and then preparing it. Then Malcolm turned to Lennie Eiler.

"Mr. Eiler," Malcolm said, "I have your specialty, rum and tomato juice. I mixed it ahead of time, so the ice would melt. I hope it's satisfactory, sir."

Malcolm reached down to the lower shelf of the wagon, found a glass with a red brew, and handed it to Eiler.

"Thanks," Eiler said. He held it up to the light. "What a beautiful red," he remarked, and he stared as if he suspected Malcolm of having poisoned the drink. Malcolm dropped his eyes, and for a moment I wondered if the drink really could have been poisoned.

How easy, I thought, to slip something in the one drink that was different in color from all the others. Then I dismissed the possibility. Malcolm would be the most obvious suspect, and he'd still have Prichard and Ed Broome to reckon with.

I watched Malcolm wheel his cart on to the next group. Behind him two maids circulated, carrying a trayload of both *Polyporus* and the mushroom paste, take your pick or have them both. I tasted Cora's new concoction. Delicious.

Nevertheless, I couldn't quite enjoy it. I kept thinking of the interplay between Malcolm and the three men he was accusing. The situation was sinister, unhealthy, and it bothered me. If Malcolm really had something against them, why didn't he clear out, instead of acting as if everything was normal?

Suddenly I couldn't stand the hypocrisy of the whole group here. I wanted a breath of fresh air, and I walked out to the porch.

The sun was dropping behind a clump of birch across the pond, and the light was magically soft. It seemed to settle on the oddly shaped rocks and to reduce the bonsais to an even smaller size than they actually were. I thought longingly of Martha in California, and I wanted to tell her that I had a premonition of impending tragedy. Wrapped up in my thoughts, I had no idea anyone was near me until I heard a cough. I swung around and saw Vesey standing next to me.

"Sorry," he said. "Did I startle you?"

"No. Or rather, I guess anything would have."

"You think something's going to happen tonight, don't you?" Vesey said. "Maybe so. This gang"—he motioned with his head—"they have their own rules. Break one of them, and they impose their own sentence and carry it out. And the idea of a butler writing a book about them—I think that's what bothers them more than anything he can say in it."

"He's one worried butler," I remarked.

Vesey, leaning forward over the railing, stared at the plank connecting the island with the shore. "These people are heavy drinkers," he remarked somberly. "And the way they're going at it, somebody's going to get real drunk and try to walk that thing, and fall in."

"Then move the plank," I said.

"Not my job," Vesey said, turning. As he did so, I glimpsed the gun in the shoulder holster under his jacket.

I stayed where I was for a few moments, staring at the water and feeling more lonesome than ever. Then I, too, went back to the party.

It was in full swing by now. There were, by my later count, fourteen people present, but as far as this story is concerned, the only ones that mattered were Cora and Vesey, and the trio who had tossed coins.

The dinner was informal, with all the servants dismissed, and instead of a large table a few smaller ones were scattered around the room. The arrangement left Prichard in the central spot, where he could exhibit his artistry at the charcoal grill. This evening he was broiling shish kebab, and doing it expertly. He speared the lamb, onions, and tomatoes with a flourish, dipped them in a sauce that Cora had created, and then put the skewers side by side on the rows of racks.

I sat down with Vesey and Myra Jones, who designs textiles. We talked first about designing, and later on about the food, which was superb. The first course was shrimp and lobster salad, garnished lavishly with Ella's inky caps. A vichyssoise followed, but that was as far as Vesey got. He'd had about half of it when he rose abruptly, muttered something, and left the table.

"I hope it's not business," I said.

Myra gave me a funny look, and she put her spoon down and ate nothing more. I was starting in on the shish kebab when suddenly I felt sick. I glanced at Myra and saw that her face was cherry-red and her eyes glassy.

I stood up shakily, jostling my tray and knocking my skewer to the floor. I was in no condition to pick it up, and I rushed out of the room. I made it as far as the porch, where I retched over the railing. When I was able to look around I saw that most of the guests were having the same trouble. I sat down, feeling dizzy and nauseated and completely disinterested in who staggered past me, only to collapse gasping in one of the deckchairs.

I heard Cora, gasping in misery, phone the main house and tell one of the servants to call a doctor. I noticed, too, that Vesey had planted himself on the stone bridge. His job was to watch three men, and although he was in no condition to carry out his assignment he was doing the next best thing—namely, keeping track of whoever crossed the bridge to the mainland. Which, apparently, no one did.

I was too sick to think clearly, but I was aware that, whatever had made us sick, it was not the mushrooms. The Japanese had eaten them raw, and Cora had been tasting them all afternoon without suffering any ill effects. It followed that somebody—and Malcolm was the most likely candidate—had added some kind of poison.

He had good reason to. He was in danger and at least three people here wanted him out of the way before his appointment with the Attorney General. The easiest way to eliminate three people was to poison the lot of us. But Malcolm a mass murderer?

In due time Dr. Ames arrived. He examined a couple of us, saw that our faces were red and swollen. and made his diagnosis. Food poisoning. He prescribed some sedatives, told us to keep warm and not to aspirate when we threw up, and he added wryly that we'd all live. Then he impounded some samples of our dinner and phoned the local Board of Health. They promised to send somebody over to pick up the specimens for analysis.

By the time the doctor left, we were beginning to feel a little better. Vesey had left his watchdog post. Lounging in comparative comfort, he seemed glad to see the doctor cross the bridge and take the gravel path leading to the main house. I decided to speak privately to Vesey and ask him what he thought of the mass poisoning. I was approaching him when Dr. Ames came rushing back.

"There's a detective here, isn't there?" he said breathlessly. "Who—which?"

Vesey, stretched out on a deckchair, answered. "Me. What's the trouble?"

"There's a dead man in the bushes. With a knife in his back."

Vesey hauled himself up, and his voice sounded a little stronger. "Show me," he said. "The rest of you, stay here."

The body was Malcolm's, and Vesey confirmed it after he'd returned to the island, made some sort of examination of the dining room, and then come out to the porch where we were all waiting.

"I'm calling the local police," he announced. "It's their case. I have no official standing here, but I can tell you this much. Malcolm was stabbed with one of those skewers we were all using. I just checked inside and the skewers are all mixed up, no telling whose is missing, so that line of inquiry is out. That's about all I can tell you now, except that nobody can leave."

Although we were recovering, we were a subdued lot. Cora plugged in the big coffee-maker, and one by one we went up to it and helped ourselves. By the time the local police arrived, we were able to answer questions quite lucidly.

We all told the same story. We'd felt sick, we'd been nauseated and dizzy. Nobody could have managed to stagger across the bridge without Vesey seeing him. As for using the plank, that was equally impossible. It would have been tricky enough for a healthy man to cross on a narrow, fifteen-foot plank in the dark, but someone dizzy with nausea? Out of the question. Nevertheless it followed that somebody had, or else that somebody not at the party had killed Malcolm. But in that case, where had the skewer come from?

The police let us all go home shortly after one. I slept soundly, and in the morning I called Martha long-distance and told her the news. She was horrified. She couldn't believe that Ella's mushrooms were at fault, but she wanted to know what kind they were. I couldn't remember the name, so I said I'd call Cora and find out.

I was having breakfast when Ella arrived. She'd heard what had happened, and she'd come to me first.

"You're sure your mushrooms were good, aren't you?" I said.

Ella nodded. "Inky caps. Very good. I eat every day, and the two Japanese eat without sick."

"Then what happened? How do you explain it?"

"No poison," Ella said. "But inky cap—good to eat, but not with drink. Eat and drink together, and then—" She had no words for it, so she made a retching sound.

I jumped up and put my arms around her. "Ella," I said, "you've just solved a murder and—" I gave the matter a second thought, and reversed myself. "Except that you haven't," I said. "I think I know how, but I don't know who."

"Maybe somebody don't drink," Ella said.

"Exactly." I remembered Cora saying the mushrooms were the squishy kind, and then Prichard had identified them, and their Latin name. Prichard, knowledgeable, thorough, must have known the consequences of combining inky caps and alcohol.

I saw it then. In that whispered conference he'd warned Eiler and Broome that everybody was due to be incapacitated, and the three of them had tossed coins to see who would refrain from drinking, stay sober, and kill Malcolm. But which one of the three actually committed the murder? And how could I prove it?

The method was clear and Vesey was probably aware of it, too. With everybody in distress and none of the servants around, the sober killer had taken a skewer, crossed to the mainland on the narrow plank, found and killed Malcolm, then returned via the plank. He'd needed only nerve and a good sense of equilibrium.

Later in the morning I went to the Prichards'. I was told that Cora was in the pleasure house, and I found her there with Vesey. They were looking glum and talking the way people talk about a tragedy after the event.

They greeted me without enthusiasm. "I think I know what happened," I said.

"Great," Vesey said sarcastically. "We know, too. Malcolm was killed, and the Attorney General won't take action against anyone without Malcolm's personal testimony. Any idea *who* killed him?"

"No, but I know how. Those mushrooms were inky caps. Right?"

"*Coprinus atramentarius,*" Cora said, nodding. She had the State Agricultural Bulletin in her lap, and she read from it.

" 'The Inky Cap,' " she said, " 'common on lawns and in gardens from August until late frosts, grows singly or in dense clusters. The cap is especially meaty, and this, along with its pleasant flavor, makes the Inky Cap one of the choice forms for the table.

" 'The cap is at first egg-shaped, but elongates—' "

"Cora!" I said. "Stop it."

She put the Bulletin down.

"I just spoke to Ella," I said. "She told me that the inky cap is fine, except that in combination with alcohol it can make you sick. And does. I guess we all know the symptoms."

Vesey slapped his hands together. "If somebody last night merely pretended to drink, then—" And Vesey went ahead and outlined a theory exactly like the one I'd figured out. "And what's more," he said, finishing, "the doctor didn't examine us individually. He prescribed the same treatment for all of us, and today there's no way in the world of telling who faked being sick."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Cora said angrily. "My guests are my friends. I know them and I can vouch for them, and I resent your saying that one of them could commit a murder." And, irritably, she threw the mushroom Bulletin to the floor.

I hadn't noticed Miss Underfoot, the white Persian, although I think I'd heard a lapping sound, as if she was drinking something at the other side of the room. Now she made a dive for the Bulletin, and missed. For a ludicrous moment she seemed unable to understand how she could have missed such an easy target. Then, drawing herself up proudly, she stalked off.

It seemed to me that she was wobbly, but she made a fair enough leap up to the sideboard, which had a narrow ledge on which Cora kept the valuable pair of vases. Miss Underfoot took a sight on the ledge and jumped. But she didn't quite make it. She clawed at the edge, hit one of Cora's precious vases, and knocked it down. The vase smashed to bits.

Vesey and I got up at the same moment and rushed over to Miss Underfoot. I got there first, and I picked her up and sniffed.

"Smell her breath," I said excitedly. "She's drunk!"

Vesey grabbed her, sniffed, then dropped her unceremoniously. He crossed the room and picked up the bowl at which Miss Underfoot had been lapping. There were three artificial peonies in it. After removing the peonies he smelled the contents of the bowl.

"Rum," he said. "Rum and tomato juice. Who drinks that?"

"Nobody," Cora said quickly. "I don't know how it got there."

"But I do," I said. "That's Lennie Eiler's drink, and it's the only drink he ever takes. And he was the only one who had a red-colored drink. I saw Malcolm hand him a special glass of it last night. Obviously he dumped the drink in the bowl and stayed sober. But is that enough to convict him?"

Vesey smiled. "When we know a man is guilty," he said, "we manage to get a confession. Don't worry about that."

After the arrest Martha and I had to move away. Apparently the Bluebird Road crowd thought it just wasn't cricket to pin a murder on one of your neighbors. We were so thoroughly ostracized that we sold our house. At a nice profit, I might add. But we have one regret.

We miss Ella and her mushrooms.

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"To be 'not yourself,' what did that mean? Did it mean that you were somebody else?"

"For some reason they were talking about the nature of experience."

"You mean that we sometimes become somebody else?"

Join a disturbing daymare game called Anonymous People—disturbing in its overtones and undertones, a daymare in its implications and insinuations. But we must warn you: play the game vicariously—only by reading about it. Don't ever play it in dead earnest . . .

EXPERIMENT IN PERSONALITY

by JULIAN SYMONS

As the years passed it seemed to Melly that the party at the Estersons had been the turning point of her life. In a literal sense this was true, because she met her husband Frederick for the first time on the night of the party; but there was more to it than that. The Estersons' party was crucial because of what happened there, the thing about which she never afterward said anything to anybody, not even to Frederick. And then again, as time went by, she had flickerings of doubt about whether anything had happened at all. Everything, in any case, seemed to depend on the party.

It was a time when she was young and silly, or perhaps

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when she was recovering from the effects of being young and silly. Her mother had died when she was three years old, and she had been brought up in Singapore by her father. It was true that he sent her to school in England but she made few friends, and the months of each year spent in England seemed to her tedious spaces between the events of her real life.

This life began again with each holiday when she flew back to Singapore and met her father at the airport, a tall, distinctive, immediately recognizable figure, with his Panama hat and ebony walking stick. She knew that he was proud of her from the way in which he introduced her with imperturbable sweet gravity to strangers at parties.

"This is my daughter Melisande," he would say. "She was named after my favorite opera." When she was small he would sometimes read to her a poem about Melisande, a poem that began:

> Pale little princess, passionate and shy,
> With delicate small hands and heavy hair,
> A simple child-like creature, wild and fair,
> Yet shadowed by a haunting mystery.

The poem seemed to her very beautiful, and she always called herself by her full name, refusing to speak to the girls at school who abbreviated it. Really, as she afterward realized, she saw her father very little, for even when she was at home he was at his office all day, often came home late at night, and sometimes did not return that day at all.

So she was alone a great deal, and although she was not conscious of being lonely it was, as he said, no life for a young girl. When she was nineteen she went off (I was *sent* off, she thought later) to a secretarial job in England. He consoled her when she wept, reciting two more lines from that sad poem, lines about her Pelleas entering at the door.

"You don't want to spend your time with an old fellow," he said. "In England your Pelleas will be waiting for you."

He gave her the boyish smile that made the words about being an old fellow quite ridiculous. It was only later, again, remembering the servants giggling together and recalling things hinted by acquaintances, that she realized he had carried on frequent affairs and that the presence of a young daughter must have been an embarrassment. Only later too she understood the meaning of a scene she had witnessed when she was ten years old.

She had come early from the local school because she felt unwell, to hear a murmur of voices and laughter. One of the voices sounded like her father's, although there was an unusual note in it. The voices came from the living room and, delighted to find him at home, she opened the door. Her first impression was that he was playing a game with a child on the floor. Then she saw that the child was a Chinese girl and that she wore no clothes.

The Chinese girl stared straight at Melisande with no expression at all. Melly could not see her father's face, and retained an impression only of a crouching powerful animal with huge hands that moved up the little Chinese girl's arms to grip her shoulders and, as it seemed, to shake her. Then Melly closed the door and ran to her room.

That was one of the nights on which her father stayed away. The next day he picked her up at school and took her out for a picnic. He never referred to the incident and she did not see the Chinese girl again. A few months later Melly was sent to boarding school in England.

She got the secretarial job through a letter written by her father to a director in a publishing firm, whom he had known long ago when they were undergraduates. Very soon she met a young man who might, she thought, be Pelleas. His name was Archie and he was a commercial artist, but he was suitably ethereal and elegant. He took her out to dinner and to concerts, and kissed her in taxis. She did not greatly enjoy the kissing, and although she permitted him to seduce her in his flat one night because he seemed to expect it, she found that also not particularly enjoyable. He did not say, "I love you," and what happened seemed very unromantic and unlike the ideal relationship between Pelleas and Melisande.

The affair with Archie, if it could be called an affair, ended abruptly a few days later when she received a cable saying that her father had died suddenly of a heart attack. She flew back to Singapore for the funeral, and there learned that he had died in bed with his latest mistress, and that he had left nothing but debts. Behind the sympathy of friends she detected a kind of malicious satisfaction. She returned to England as soon as possible. For some reason she had a horror of seeing Archie again, and refused to speak to him when he telephoned.

In the weeks that followed she took a great many pills of various kinds, some on the instructions of her doctor, pills to tranquillize and to enliven, and she mixed these pills with drink so that she was in what seemed a state of continual light-headedness. She worked for Mr. Radcliffe, the editorial director who had known her father, and he was very gentle; but he was also ponderously dignified and somehow she was put off by the rimless glasses he wore and the sniffs that punctuated his remarks. When he asked her out to dinner one night, the sniff was distressingly in evidence as he pondered what to order. Then she was irritated when he consulted her about the wine. Her father would never have consulted any lady about the wine.

"The truth is I feel a little responsible for you, my dear. After all I did know Charles. A remarkable man. He was the leader among our little group at the University, you know. I always thought—"

Mr. Radcliffe did not complete the sentence and she did not ask him to do so because it seemed to imply that her father had promised more than he had performed in life, and if that was his opinion she did not want to hear it. "But in the last few weeks you've been obviously—well, not yourself." He sniffed.

She sipped the wine. "Does that mean you want to get rid of me?"

"Not at all. It's just that—well, you've suffered a great tragedy. I think it has affected you."

"It's true I'm not myself," she admitted. There was consolation in uttering the words aloud. To be "not yourself," what did that mean? Did it mean that you were somebody else?

"I should like you to feel that you could come to me with any problems." Sniff. "If it would help you to have a few days off, that could easily be arranged."

"I'm perfectly all right. But thank you, Mr. Radcliffe."

I do believe, she thought, that he's making approaches to me, a man old enough to be— She did not complete the sentence even in her mind. But perhaps she was wrong, for although Mr. Radcliffe drove her back to the apartment she shared with another girl he did not even put his hand on her knee, and he refused her invitation to come up for a nightcap. On the following day he was his usual ponderous self and it seemed impossible that he had ever suggested she should call him Donald.

Mr. Radcliffe was a bore, there was no denying it, and to her surprise most of the authors she met in the office were boring, too. Although some of them wrote about young people they were almost all of them well over forty, and in spite of the fact that, as she gathered with astonishment, few of them made a living from their books, they were tremendously puffed up with their own importance. Some of them tried to flirt with her—it was the only word she could use—and one of them took her out to lunch and talked about his own books all the time.

Gabriel Esterson was interesting because he was so unlike the other authors. He was tall and fair, with bright blue eyes, a lick of hair that came down over his forehead and an enthusiastic manner. He wore turtleneck shirts, or close-fitting suits with high rolled lapels. He wrote what she supposed were science fiction stories—about subjects like the last man left alive after an atomic war and the way in which he repopulated the world by constructing a machine able to bear children, a procedure worked out in much technical detail. During the course of the story the machines learned how to reproduce with each other and at the end they killed the last man.

One day Esterson stopped in her small office after having seen Mr. Radcliffe and asked if she liked the book.

"It was interesting."

"You didn't like it? Why not say so?"

He sat on the edge of her desk. This was one of his turtleneck days.

"All right, I didn't like it."

"No need to be uptight about it. What's your name?" She told him and he turned down the corners of his wide mouth. "Ever have fantastic fun?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I don't either, baby." The door of Mr. Radcliffe's room opened. He stood there frowning behind the rimless glasses. Gabriel got off the desk and raised a hand. "See you."

"That young man is *not* a very desirable character," Mr. Radcliffe said later.

"How do you mean?"

"To my mind there is something unwholesome about his books. Although of course he is a clever writer, which is why we publish him. I may be old-fashioned." A sniff. She offered no contradiction. "He has a strange wife. Her name is Innes. I shouldn't be surprised if she takes drugs, she is like a skeleton."

"Oh."

"And then they give very odd parties."

"You've been to them?"

"To one only. We wore masks painted to represent politicians and animals."

She echoed stupidly, "Politicians and animals."

"They fought together. Or pretended to fight. It was all something to do with the release of energy, according to Esterson. I found it distasteful."

Distasteful, or fantastic fun? A week later Esterson telephoned and asked her to a party on the following Saturday. "Bring a boy friend if you want to, but I'd like to know now. The number of guests is important."

"I'll be alone." She had had no boy friend since Archie.

"Fantastic."

"Is there something special—"

"Baby, about my parties there's always something special. Not before nine o'clock, not after ten. After ten the gates are locked, we shut the prisoners in. And wear old clothes. Don't dress up, dress down."

His laugh was infectiously gay. She looked forward to the party. He was not exactly her image of Pelleas and in any case he was married, but there was something exciting about the whole prospect. And maybe she would meet Pelleas at the party.

On Thursday she got the flu. She stayed in bed and Olivia, the girl with whom she shared the apartment, telephoned Mr. Radcliffe. During the day she took a variety of pills and felt better, but in the evening she was running a temperature.

On Friday morning she was a little better again, and then in the evening felt really ill. Olivia was going away to her parents for the weekend. She wanted to call a doctor. Melisande told her not to be ridiculous.

"But, Melly—"

"My name is Melisande."

"You're just being stupid."

"I'm going to this party tomorrow night, remember."

"You must be crazy."

Melisande had difficulty getting Olivia into focus. Sometimes she wavered about as though under water and at other times she was quite distinct, but there were two of her. Olivia took off her clothes preparatory to changing her dress and stood, naked but for brassiere and briefs, in the middle of the room. Melisande looked away for some reason. Olivia was a rather flat-faced girl with dark eyes, and for a moment Melisande had the impression she was looking at the Chinese girl in Singapore.

"You—" She sat up in bed.

"Yes?"

"Nothing. You are Olivia?"

"Look here, I think you're delirious."

"No, I was just being stupid. You said so, remember? I'm perfectly all right."

She watched to see if Olivia changed again while she dressed, but nothing happened. When she rushed off finally to catch her train after dithering about making fresh lemon juice, Melisande felt nothing but relief. She took four of her pills and fell asleep almost immediately.

When she woke, light was filtering through the thin curtains. Her vision was clear, her mind vacant, and she stared for what seemed to be minutes at the pattern of wild flowers on the wallpaper, and then she put out her fingers to touch them. The wall was tangibly there but that created a problem for it meant that she was at home, really at home again in Singapore.

Turning over and closing her eyes she saw again and more vividly the wild flowers on the wallpaper, a pattern which her father had ordered because he said she looked like a wild flower herself. Columbine, eglantine, larkspur, what were the names? The larkspur was a brilliant blue. In a moment she would hear the padding feet of the servants or her father singing an old song as he always did before taking his bath:

Don't go walking down
Lovers' Lane
With somebody else . . .

He always said "somebody else" instead of the correct words, "anybody else." Who was somebody else? She opened her eyes and looked at the clock which said ten minutes past four. How could it say that when daylight was showing through the curtains? She turned over again and looked at the wall which was now a neutral biscuit color, devoid of any kind of flower. She was in her rather dingy bedroom in the apartment.

"Afternoon," she said. "I've slept for twenty-four hours."

It was not twenty-four but she could not be bothered to work out the exact number. She got out of bed, went to the lavatory, drank a glass of water, and tried without success to find her pulse. She stuck a thermometer into her mouth and took it out when she felt her eyes closing. The reading seemed to be 102. Utterly weary, she crawled back into bed again and closed her eyes.

She opened them a moment later and looked at the clock, which now said eight fifteen. She remembered the party, got out of bed, and decided that she felt much better. The thermometer lay on the bathroom shelf but she did not use it. Instead she ran a very hot bath, put in double the amount of bath oil she generally used, and immersed herself for twenty minutes. Later she rubbed the steam from the mirror and considered her face and body.

Pale little princess, passionate and shy—but in fact she was a biggish girl, with bones that distinctly stuck out, long twine-colored hair, a face with neat ears and bright eyes but rather too long a nose, breasts of no particular importance, a good flat stomach, and reasonably attractive legs. It was unremarkable physical equipment for a princess, but would Pelleas think so?

An hour later, after eating with difficulty a tuna fish sandwich and taking two pep pills, she was on her way to the party. She was lucky enough to find a taxi just at the door.

There is an area lying between St. John's Wood and Maida Vale where the streets are wide, the houses large and Victorianly solid, and the pervading air is one of decayed gentility which has not yet changed to smartness. The Estersons lived in one of these houses.

Gabriel came to the door, took both her hands in his, then decided to kiss her.

"Baby, you're here. Fantastic. This is Innes. My wife. Melisande."

"Melisande." Her name was repeated faintly, with a dying fall. Innes Esterson was tall and extremely thin, with a long white face and drooping shoulders. She wore a bright green shirt and tight-fitting trousers. She peered through short-sighted eyes and murmured again, "Melisande." Then she added, "Your clothes."

Melly had not quite known how to take Gabriel's instructions and was wearing a blue dress which although not fashionable hardly came in the category of old clothes.

"Perfectly all right," Gabriel said. "Super. Come and meet people."

Twenty of them were standing in a large high-ceilinged living room. Most of the men and some of the women wore pullovers and narrow trousers, but she was glad to see some other dresses. She found a drink in her hand, sipped it, discovered that it had a pleasant bitter-sweetness like some dimly remembered medicine, and drank it down. The glass was refilled almost at once.

She sat on a sofa with a

young man who wore long sideburns and talked about underground films. Names slipped off his tongue—Grabowski, Smith, Flugheimer. She caught hold of one and repeated it faintly. "Masters?"

"Bud Masters. That's me."

"You're an—underground film maker." She had a vision of him living underground. He made films there, working in large windowless rooms like boxes. Men and women moved around in them, oscillating slowly and never speaking. At his word of command, "Action," they speeded up and began to jerk, never straying from their set positions while he moved among them with his hand-held camera going snap, snap. Later in the dark room, in the darkest of the windowless boxes, he developed the films which showed—what did they show?

"Does underground film making take place underground?" This reasonable question was answered with a laugh. Then Bud Masters vanished and a woman with short-cut hair and a thin nose, wearing a monocle, sat next to her.

"Darling, you're a wit."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Lenya. What do you do?"

At that moment she could not remember, and so repeated the question. Lenya laughed and her monocle dropped. She replaced it.

"I'm on the box."

On the box? "The underground box?" Melly ventured. "No windows?"

Lenya laughed again. This time the monocle stayed in. "The idiot box, darling, the hot cod's eye, on your nelly, the telly. 'Down Our Street'—it's been my bread and butter for six months. But they're killing me next week."

"I'm sorry."

Lenya leaned toward her and their shoulders touched. "What's the idea tonight, what's Gabriel up to?" Melly shook her head and sipped her drink. "I mean, he's always up to something. He's a fun man, isn't he? Were you at the Lies and Truth party?"

"No."

"We all wore masks and had to tell lies about our past lives. Of course they were almost all about sex. Then there was a psychologist here who analyzed the stories. To Gabriel it was a kind of game—everything's a game to him."

"And Innes?"

"Innes of course is—well, I mean, she's Innes. But Gabriel, he's never grown up."

Melisande withdrew her shoulder from the warmth of contact. Gabriel was standing over them, with two men beside him.

"Get up, Lenya, this is round one, and clinches are not allowed until round five." He took Lenya by the hand and raised her to her feet.

"You know what you are, Gabriel, you're just a damn creep," she said without heat.

"Better men than you have said worse. You can't monopolize the loveliest girl in the room. Upsadaisy." His hand, which felt very cool, took Melisande's and she was standing up. Her body felt weightless. He introduced her to the two men, but she did not hear their names. One was an artist and the other a public-relations man connected with an American film company.

She listened to them, but although she heard what they said it did not quite seem to make sense. Even the words they used were unfamiliar. Psychedelic she had heard often, although she was never quite sure what it meant; but what was "a hard-edge painting"? And what was "kinetic art"? She began to drift, or float, away from them but was hauled back by a question.

"Is this your thing?" It was the artist, plump and red-cheeked. "I mean, Gabriel's kind of thing, does it put you on?"

"I don't know," she said truthfully. "What kind of thing is it?"

"That's the question." The artist looked at the public-relations man. "Isn't that the question, Bruno?"

"You're right there, Whit. With Gabriel that's always the question." Bruno had a bristly mustache and bulging eyes. "Shall I tell you something? I fancy you."

If I had some vanishing cream, she thought, I could smear it on that nasty little mustache and it would disappear. And if I had *enough* vanishing cream I could smear it all over him and then *he* would disappear. The idea made her giggle.

"What's so funny?" asked Bruno Mustache, but without answering this she did drift or float away to find herself talking to Innes, who spoke in a faint expiring voice, in gasps like a swimmer pushing a head up out of water and then dropping back. For some reason they were talking about the nature of experience.

"You don't think then—that there's anything in—mysticism? In getting—beyond the self?"

Melly considered this. "I don't know. I've never had an experience like that."

"Gabriel believes that what Western man feels—is limited by his—environment." Innes' eyes were little colorless pills set in deep sockets alongside her long nose. "He thinks we should try to—reach out—to something beyond—ourselves."

The words seemed to sound an echo in her mind. "Yes."

"That's what his work is—all about." Innes raised an arm almost as thin as a clothesline and let it drop again. In a hopeless voice she said, "Experiment is—necessary, don't you think?"

"You mean that we sometimes become somebody else?"

A squat toadlike figure appeared at Innes' side. "Why, *Adrian*," Innes said in that expiring voice. She offered a papery cheek which he touched ceremoniously. Innes made a feeble gesture in Melisande's direction. "This is—" Her voice died away altogether. Adrian ignored Melisande. She moved away and met Frederick.

He was leaning against a wall with a glass in his hand, a tall man with a brown face, and he gave her at once an impression of reliability. It was connected somehow with his old tweed jacket and his polished shoes, but there was something reassuring even in the way he nodded to her, said hello, and asked if she knew everybody. She replied that she knew nobody at all.

"I'll tell you a secret, neither do I." His face showed deep creases, like crinkles in well-worn leather, when he smiled. "And I'll tell you something else. I'm older than anybody else here, and I'm feeling my age. What's your name?"

When she told him he said, "Beautiful. But rather a mouthful for a practical man like me. I shall call you Melly."

Somehow she did not feel any resentment when he used the abbreviation, and when he said that his name was Frederick Thomas she thought a moment and then said it suited him.

"I feel that's a criticism," he said.

For a moment she had trouble in keeping him properly focused. But she blinked and it was all right again.

"If you're a practical man and you don't know anybody—" She lost track of what she wanted to say, then came out with it triumphantly, "—why are you here?"

"I'm a computer engineer and I've been helping Gabriel with his last book."

"The one about—about the machines who had children?"

"That's it. He wanted to make the mechanical details plausible, and they are. A remarkable character, our Gabriel."

"I work for his publisher."

He nodded. "Melly, are you feeling all right?"

"Perfectly." But the considerate tone in which he spoke almost brought tears to her eyes. "Only I don't think I like this drink very much." She gave it to him and he put it on a shelf.

"There's some food over there. Would you like anything?"

She shook her head. "My name really is Melisande, there's a poem about me. 'Pale little princess, passionate and shy,' it begins. Do you know it?"

"I don't read much poetry. I'm afraid I'm an uncultured character. But I'll tell you something, it suits you."

"I like your jacket." She touched the rough cloth of it at just the moment when Gabriel clapped his hands.

He stood looking down on them, and her momentary impression was that some act of levitation had been performed. Then she saw that he was standing on a table. His blue eyes glittered, his fair hair hung down over his forehead. She had been aware even in the staid office surroundings of some magnetic quality about him and now this magnetism was intensified so that he looked like a woodland demon.

"We are going to conduct an experiment in personality." There was a faint murmur from the group, which might have been laughter or excitement. "I'm not talking about pot or LSD—you know what I think about them, they're simply means of heightening sensation artificially. In the long run they have no meaning, they don't say anything about what you *are.* They turn you on or they don't, all right. But supposing we dispensed with artificiality's aid, could we still turn ourselves on? What sort of people *are* we?"

"Respectable," somebody said. There was a small ripple of laughter. Gabriel threw back his head and joined it. Melisande looked at his neck, white and smooth. Something about the shape made her uncomfortable. She turned her head and saw Innes. Her eyes were closed, her lips moved as if in prayer.

"All right. Each of us has his own identity, and most of those identities are respectable. But suppose we were anonymous, suppose A were the same as B, supposing all differences of sex were suddenly wiped out—"

"Shame," somebody said, but there was no laughter.

"—Are you convinced you would be the same person? Might you not become somebody else?" Gabriel's voice had quickened.

"How are you going to make us anonymous?" That was the underground film man, Bud—what was his last name?

"That's the game. I call it Anonymous People. It's a scientific experiment, but there's one rule. When you're playing, don't speak." Gabriel paused. "If people speak, sex differences will be noticed—that's the point. Otherwise, just have fun. One more thing."

He looked round and they stared up at him expectantly. "Open your minds to the possible. Don't hold back. Anyone who doesn't want to play, say so."

Nobody moved. Gabriel paused as though considering whether to say more, then jumped down. Was Innes still praying? She seemed to have disappeared.

"But, Gabriel darling, what do we *do?*" Lenya asked.

Gabriel said mockingly, "Since you ask, Lenya darling, you can be first. Through there." He opened a door, which was not the one through which they had come in, gave her a gentle push, closed it again, and stood beside it. "One at a time."

Frederick spoke from beside her. "You said there was only one rule."

"Not once you're on the other side of the door. Except that you don't come back here. There'll be a little wait. I suggest you all pour yourselves another drink."

Half a dozen people did so, but there was an uneasy silence. After a minute there was a buzz, rather like that heard in a doctor's waiting room. Gabriel jerked a thumb at Bud Masters, who went through the door.

The process was repeated at about the same intervals of time. Once there was a longer waiting period, perhaps of two minutes, and Gabriel opened the door, then quickly closed it again. Beside her Frederick said something.

"What's that?" she asked.

"I don't much like this. He's playing with things he doesn't understand."

"It's a scientific experiment." Her words came out slowly.

"It's Gabriel getting his kicks."

"Frederick," Gabriel called. Frederick smiled at her, went across to the door, and passed through it.

Now that he had gone she felt very tired. She sat down in an armchair and closed her eyes. Behind them some recollection seemed to burn. She was in a plane which swooped in circles lower and lower toward the ground, the ground becoming bigger, the details of it frighteningly large. Bump, bump, they had landed, but where was her father? He appeared at the door of the plane and swept off his Panama hat with a smile that was not reassuring but mocking. She got up to greet him but something, a pressure on one shoulder, held her back in the seat.

With an effort she opened her eyes. Gabriel's hand was on her shoulder. He said, "Your turn, baby." There were only two other people left in the room. He opened the door for her and with a feeling of physical dread she passed through it.

She found herself in Gabriel's study. There was a work chart on one wall, a neat desk beside it. It was all perfectly ordinary, but then what had she expected? And what was she meant to do? A single lamp burned over the desk but some other light disturbed her. Slowly, and again with effort, she swiveled her eyes and saw over a door an extemporized sign with a light behind it, which said in capitals: *TAKE OFF SHOES, MEN TAKE OFF JACKETS, PUT ON CLOTHES AND GLOVES, LEAVE BY THIS DOOR.*

Now she saw a row of shoes on the floor, looking as though they had been left outside a hotel bedroom; men's jackets were flung on a sofa, a bundle of clothes was beneath the sign. She picked up the clothes. There were three pieces of clothing in each bundle and they were made of rubber. Three-piece suit in rubber, she thought, and checked her laughter. Rubber gloves lay beside the clothes.

The trousers had an elastic waist and slipped on easily after she had taken off her shoes, and the upper part was quite simple too, a sort of rubber windbreaker, again elastic at the waist, which clung in some places and was loose in others. The helmet-style headpiece had holes in the mouth and nostrils through which to breathe, but otherwise it fitted closely.

"I must look like something from Mars," she thought and looked round the room to find with a shock that she could hardly see it. The eyepieces of the rubber helmet must have been made of some partly opaque material that made everything look dim. She had to grope rather than walk.

"Come on," a voice snapped. Gabriel had opened the door from the living room and was looking in. She raised a rubber hand and opened the door below the lighted sign. As she passed through and closed it she heard the buzzer sound.

It was like entering another

world. No, no, she thought. I mustn't use a cliché like that; rather it was like being a partially sighted person, aware of everything yet unable to see properly. She was in a hall, and this must be the entrance hall of the house, but it looked entirely different through these blurry eyepieces.

She opened a door but it seemed to be only that of a closet under the stairs, so she closed it again. The staircase was by her side, a passage loomed ahead, and the element of choice involved in the question "Which way shall I go?" suddenly seemed important. As slowly as an invalid she made her way along the passage to find at the end of it another flight of stairs leading downward.

She descended, holding onto the stair rail, and again the loss of tactile sensation because of the rubber suit was disconcerting, although she told herself that it was only like wearing rubber gloves for washing up. At the bottom of the stairs there were three doors. Which one to choose, and where was everybody?

She opened the middle door and made a small sound of surprise when she saw a reflection of herself inside. Then the figure raised a rubber arm and saw another rubber figure holding a knife and she realized that everybody was dressed alike. What was it Gabriel had said—"supposing A were the same as B"—that was it precisely. The knife descended, carved a slice off some kind of meat that looked like ham, pinned it with the knife, and offered it to her. She was in the kitchen.

She shook her head and the figure began to push the ham through the small breathing slit in the headpiece made for the mouth. She watched with revulsion as the meat disappeared bit by bit rather as though it were being consumed by a snake. Half of the piece of meat dropped off and fell to the floor. With a slight bow the figure offered her the knife and she took it automatically while watching the other man—or woman?—who had opened a refrigerator and was peering inside.

A bottle of milk was ceremoniously taken out, held up, the top removed. For drinking? Unbelievingly she saw the milk—she knew that it was milk although in this dim light the color was indiscernible—poured on to the floor. Ham-nibbler wagged a reproving finger. Milk-pourer put the empty bottle back into the refrigerator and spread out arms like a conjurer who has performed a successful trick. Melly turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Anonymous People, she thought as she opened a second door which proved to be that of a dining room in which another rubber figure was arranging knives and forks on the table in an elaborate star pattern; I don't like anonymous people. She stumbled a little as she hurried up the stairs thinking, I want to get out of this, I am not an anonymous person.

She went to the door of Gabriel's study and shrank back as another anonymous person came out and passed apparently without seeing her. With one rubber paw on the door handle she remembered that Gabriel had said, "Don't come back here," and thought how conspicuous she would make herself by going back. I can play the game for a little while longer, she thought; after all, I don't have to join in and *do* anything. She could find some place in a room upstairs and just sit there quietly.

On the second floor she was again confronted by a choice of doors. Like Alice in Wonderland, she thought vaguely, although was it really like Alice? She played a game of her own in front of the doors, saying eeny-meenie-minie-mo to decide which one to open. It turned out that she had picked the bathroom, and she shut this door quickly when she saw a rubber figure standing under the shower with water pouring all over it, him, her. The figure capered about at sight of her and she remembered her father saying when she was a small child, "Come on in, the water's lovely."

The sense of outrage she felt about the man—it must have been a man, no woman would have done such a thing—came from the feeling that he was doing the wrong thing; she could not have put it more precisely than that. When she opened the adjoining door, she entered what turned out to be a bedroom and sat down on a bed; at first she thought there was nobody else in the room and that she had escaped from the world of wrong behavior.

Then she saw the rubber man—she was prepared, it turned out, to identify all of them as men—sitting at a small writing desk. It took her a moment or two to see what he was doing, and another few seconds before she believed it. He had a screwdriver or chisel in his hand and he was using it to force open the top of the desk. The effect, as the top opened, was rather that of an old silent film, for she saw the splintered wood where the lock had been forced and yet because of the rubber suiting she could hear nothing. But now the sense of outrage was strong enough for her to try to stop him.

She got off the bed and advanced toward the man. He was not aware of her presence until she was almost on him. Then he jumped up, backed away, turned, and ran out of the door. She did not understand why he had seemed so frightened until she looked down and saw that the knife given to her in the kitchen was still clasped in her rubbery right hand. He had thought an attack was being made on him, and perhaps he was right. Perhaps she would have attacked him with the knife. She might have done the wrong thing, too.

The thought was upsetting. She went over to the desk and closed it, resisting the very real temptation to look at the letters she could see inside. I must stop it, she said to herself, and knew that to get away from temptation she must hide. She knew the place for hiding. She hurried out of the bedroom, passed two figures as she ran down the stairs—one of them tried to stop her—reached the ground floor, opened the door of the closet under the stairs, and got inside.

She sat down because there was no room to stand up, pulled the door almost completely shut, and had instantly the most wonderful feeling of safety. She was at once perfectly relaxed and very tired. She put the knife on her knees, leaned back, and closed her eyes . . .

She could not remember afterward how long she had slept, or indeed whether she had slept at all. The inside of the closet was dark, and it made little difference to what she saw or didn't see whether her eyes were open or closed, as she found when she flapped them up and down like tiny shutters. And it was as she did this flapping—if my eyes were wings, she thought, I could use them to fly—that she became aware of another presence. She did not *hear*—that was not possible—but she knew there was somebody else with her.

Strangely enough, perhaps because of her utter relaxation, she was not frightened. She was prepared for something to happen, yet when it did happen she had at first a failure of apprehension so that she shifted her body slightly away from the thing that was touching her. The thing moved with her, rippled down her backbone, and she realized its nature. A hand was moving up and down her back.

The activities of this disembodied hand gave her pleasure. It began at the small of her back, moved gently in circles that radiated out from the backbone and rose to the nape of the neck, which reassuringly did not feel like the real nape of a real neck because the whole thing was made of rubber. The effect was soothing; it made her feel at peace, yet one of the agreeable things about it was the undercurrent of excitement, the sense that this was a preliminary activity.

She knew that the body behind her would move closer, and it did. The hand moved round to the front of her body, and just when she was wondering whether this was a one-handed man, the other hand made itself known. The two rubber hands linked together across her middle—how clearly she saw them in her mind's eye!—and then moved upward, upward.

The sensation she experienced then was of a piercing sweetness previously unknown to her. Certainly the affair with clumsy Archie had offered nothing comparable to it. The other body pressed against her urgently now, and the hands now gripped hard where they had previously stroked. She wanted to turn her head but it seemed to be fixed, and what would she see but a mask made of rubber?

The knowledge that no fulfillment was possible heightened her pleasure and even when the hands moved up to her neck, the pleasure remained undiminished. Then the hands tightened and she was struck with panic, trying to turn her head to ease the pressure on her windpipe, twisting to convey that he was pressing too hard, pulling at the hands with her feeble paws, groping for the knife on her knees, and using it to jab upward awkwardly once, twice.

And yet, before she lost consciousness, she wanted to express regret for this action and to make it known somehow that her predominant feeling had been one of pleasure, almost of ecstasy . . .

"Rather a success," Gabriel said. "Perhaps it should have been more carefully organized, but still distinctly a success. Several plates and dishes smashed, one desk forced open, one bathroom semi-flooded, three chairs and a small table thrown out of a window. Some odds and ends broken, probably by accident. Would any of you have done such things if you hadn't been anonymous? Of course not. Two regrettable incidents. One couple found removing their suits for extracurricular purposes. I won't name them. And one faint—from heat, I expect. Sorry about that."

She heard all this very vaguely, but felt the need to protest. "I didn't faint. Somebody tried to—" She stopped at that. She was lying on a sofa in the sitting room and now she looked up at the faces around her, some anxious and some amused. Gabriel's face was amused. The room wavered. She closed her eyes.

There was a hand on her forehead. A voice said, "Burning hot. She ought to be in bed."

She opened her eyes again. "How did you find me?"

Gabriel answered. "You were flat out on the floor in the hall, darling. I brought you in here and gave you some brandy."

"In the hall? Not in the closet under the stairs?"

"The glory hole? No, baby. Were you there?"

"I thought so. Did you find a—a knife?"

He raised his eyebrows, shook his head, and she wondered if he had been the man with her. Articulating with conscious clearness she said, "I was in what you call the glory hole. You were in there with me, weren't you?"

There was a murmur, one distinctly of amusement. Gabriel said gently, indulgently, "If you say so. And what happened in the glory hole, baby?"

But what had happened—the burning pleasure she had felt and her intense desire to repeat it—was something she could not say out loud. She shook her head and stared at him. His blue eyes looked back at her searchingly, and his words seemed to have a peculiar emphasis. "What you've got to remember is that nothing happened, nothing at all. You fainted and I found you on the floor in the hall. Anything else was your imagination."

She nodded, to show that she was prepared not to accuse him again. Her hand went to her neck, which did not ache or feel sore. Was it true then? Had she imagined it all? She looked wonderingly round at the faces—Bud Masters with his sideburns, monocled Lenya, Bruno Mustache, drooping Innes, and the others. They stared back at her with concern. There was a silence, broken by Bruno.

"Can't imagine what you think you've proved, Gabriel. Just got a lot of stuff smashed up, that's all."

Now Gabriel's gaze shifted from her, and his manner eased. "I don't set out to prove things.

Except to myself. And to Innes perhaps."

Lenya, hovering beside Melisande, said, "You look pretty wild, you know. As if you're not really here. Come with me and I'll put you to bed."

"Not necessary." That was Gabriel. "We can easily put you up here, can't we, Innes?"

"No." The thought of staying in that house terrified her. She saw Frederick's leathery face and spoke to it. "Please take me home."

She barely said goodbye to Gabriel and Innes, and did not speak to the rest of them. On the way back in the taxi Frederick said it had been a damned stupid party and that Gabriel was a silly man. She felt too tired to contradict him.

Back in her apartment he said, "Now, if you can get yourself to bed I'll make some hot milk. Any aspirin about?"

"Yes, but I've got pills—"

"No pills. Just aspirin."

He sat beside the bed while she drank the milk and aspirin. She waited for him to kiss her, but he only looked at her with dog-brown eyes like her father's. Or had her father's eyes been blue like Gabriel's? It worried her that she could not remember.

"Feeling better?" She felt just the same but said she was better. He spoke earnestly. "You weren't feeling well enough to go out, and it was terribly hot inside that rubber gear. You fainted and Gabriel found you. Nothing else happened."

"Nothing else happened," she echoed like a child, closed her eyes, and was asleep. She felt his lips brush her forehead in a good-night kiss like her father's—or was that a dream, too?

On the following morning he phoned to see how she was and asked her out to lunch as soon as she felt up to it, any day, any day at all. She did not really feel up to it, but she had lunch with him that day and dinner the day after. A month later they were married.

Frederick had sufficient money to buy a little house almost in the country, but not too far away from his work. She left the publishing firm because she did not want to see Gabriel again and got a few other secretarial jobs; but Frederick did not want his wife to work and she settled down to becoming a housewife.

He called her Melly because Melisande, he said, was rather ridiculous in this day and age, and she accepted this. Their lovemaking was infrequent, inhibited, and produced no children. Frederick became in time an administrator, in charge of a large department. Melly took up social work connected with juvenile delinquents, which she found interesting. They were good solid citizens, and as their friends used to say, real assets to the community.

Frederick never again mentioned the Anonymous People party to her, and as time went by she felt increasing doubt that anything had happened. Had she imagined it all, or were there other possibilities in her personality that remained unfulfilled? And not only in her personality.

How could she ask if the long deep scratches on Frederick's arm—the scratches she had noticed when he brought her the milk in bed that night—if they had been made by her knife when it tore through the rubber windbreaker? She was willing—or was she?—to bury the events of that evening, so that she never knew whether for one single hour of his life, he—like Melisande—had become somebody else.

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THE WILL-O'-THE-WISP MYSTERY

Part Four: *The Bishop*

by MR. X

WHAT HAS GONE BEfore: When a masked gang hijacks a prison van and aids the escape of six convicted criminals, Sheriff Barker and Inspector Fleming turn to David Piper, known as The Manhunter, for assistance. Piper, Director of the state's Department of Apprehension, has numerous underworld .contacts—including the one-eyed Tommy—but at first they offer little help on the case. The six escapees—five men and a woman—seem to have completely vanished, leading Piper to suspect they have become accessories in some sort of big caper. Tracking down one of the six, art forger Joe Reilly, Piper captures him in a small art gallery where he has been using another name. A second of the six, swindler Charlie Hall, is found murdered in a hotel room. Piper solves the crime and arrests the room clerk, one of Hall's swindle victims, but autopsy evidence reveals that Hall was drugged with sleeping pills at the time of the murder, thus further confusing the investigation.

Learning from Tommy One-Eye that underworld kingpin Nick Bruno, the most important of the six escapees, is again running his rackets from a secret hideout, Piper arranges to meet Sammy Sargent, Bruno's second in command. In an apparent effort to protect his boss, Sargent offers information

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that another of the six criminals, bank robber Jack Larner, will be at the local airport. Piper and Fleming capture him following a daring bank robbery, but Sheriff Barker brings them some bizarre news from Headquarters.

"All hell's broken out at the morgue. Someone got in during the night and mutilated Charlie Hall's corpse."

A chill runs down Piper's spine. "Mutilated it? How?"

"Someone cut off the head and stole it!"

CONFIRMATION OF Sheriff Barker's words was not long in coming. At the morgue everything was turmoil. A brief look around was all they needed before going to Piper's office.

"No calls, Susan," he told his secretary, settling down to face the two men across the desk. Inspector Fleming wore a puzzled, worried frown, while Barker's expression was more one of anger and outrage.

"Why would anyone steal a dead man's head?" he demanded.

"I can think of three possible reasons," Piper said, ticking them off on his fingers. "One, to prevent identification; two, to prevent chemical tests of some sort on the brain; three, simply because someone wanted a head."

Sheriff Barker grimaced. "But Charlie Hall had already been identified by his fingerprints—and the fingers weren't mutilated by the thief."

"And your third reason suggests nothing short of insanity," Fleming joined in. "Do you think we're dealing with a madman?"

"No." Piper reached for his tobacco pouch. "Which leaves us with reason Number Two. Perhaps the thief didn't know we'd already concluded the autopsy. Perhaps he didn't want us to find out about the sleeping pills."

"You're saying that Hall was set up to be murdered by that room clerk?"

"It's a growing possibility. After all, a number of people must have known that Hall had swindled the clerk."

"But why would Hall go there in the first place, if he feared for his life?"

David Piper breathed a long sigh. "That I don't know. But at least we now have three of the six accounted for, and that should ease the pressure on you, Sheriff."

Barker nodded. "Maybe the newspapers will stop blaming me for the escape."

"I hear the big fish, Bruno, is back," Fleming remarked.

"That's the word around town. What do you think, Mr. Piper? Any lead to Bruno's whereabouts?"

Piper shook his head. He wasn't about to admit that the tip of Jack Larner's whereabouts had come from Bruno's lieutenant. He glanced at the photo and description in the file before him. "Bruno's fifty-five years old. Medium build, dark bushy hair streaked with gray, and the beginnings of a potbelly. The face is quite ordinary, and the description could fit half the middle-aged men in town. I'd guess Bruno could grow a beard and walk down Main Street without anybody recognizing him. And I suppose he could run his underworld empire in hiding for years, meeting only with his most trusted aides. After all, Howard Hughes has run a business empire for twenty years in much the same manner."

"But if Bruno is back at his old activities and three of the others are dead or in jail, where does that leave your theory of a big caper, a joint conspiracy of some sort?"

"Nowhere, and I'm the first to admit it. I still can't understand why the gunmen who actually attacked the van were paid so much, though. There's big money involved here somewhere." He had another thought which he tried to put into words. "Perhaps the plot is *against* the six, rather than *by* them. Reilly was a pawn, easy to catch, Hall was murdered, and Larner was betrayed. Maybe someone just wants all six out of the way."

"Then why not just leave them in prison?" Fleming argued reasonably. "Are you trying to say that someone arranged their escape just so he could put them back in prison?"

Piper had to admit it sounded far-fetched. "What about the person who broke into the morgue? Any clues?"

Sheriff Barker scratched his close-cropped head. "Not a thing. There's no heavy security at the morgue, you know. People aren't usually trying to break in."

"Let's worry about the three still at large," Fleming suggested. "What about them?"

"I'm working on it," Piper said. "I'll find them."

Sheriff Barker smiled, but there was no humor in his expression. "Of course you will. You're the Manhunter, aren't you?"

After they had left, David Piper sat alone at his desk, puzzling over the files before him. He had a bit of a headache, and he knew he needed a rest. A few days off, perhaps a drive to New York to see his wife Jennie.

Susan entered and stood at his side while he thought about it, and when he glanced up she said, "Tommy called. He left this number."

"Thanks, Susan."

"You look tired."

"We had a hard morning out at the airport, and now this business at the morgue." He took the number from her and dialed it himself, knowing that Tommy would be waiting for his call, probably in some shabby lunch counter or third-rate bar across town.

The one-eyed man's voice came over the wire almost at once. "I heard you nabbed Larner at the airport."

"News travels fast."

"Do you want another one? Make it two in one day?"

"Who? The girl?" Despite his dulling headache, Piper felt his stomach muscles contract with excitement. It was the scent of the chase, the thing in his blood that always drove him on.

"Not the girl. Courtney, the Englishman. I've got a friend who knows where he's holed up."

"Where?"

"He wants money, Manhunter. He'll only tell you in person."

Piper sighed. He was used to this. "Where do I meet him?"

"I'll have him at the Winking Moon in an hour."

After Tommy hung up, Piper flipped open the file on Hugh Courtney. British, 34, tall, slim, dark hair. A handsome fellow.

"I'm going out," he told Susan.

The man in the booth with Tommy was lean and sick-looking. His lackluster eyes were surrounded by deep circles, and he pulled back his pallid lips to reveal blunt green teeth such as Piper had never seen before.

"This is Fritz Yomen," Tommy said by way of introduction. "Tell him your story, Fritz."

The sick-looking man with the green teeth peered across the table at Piper. "No story till I see the money."

"How much?"

He ran a black-coated tongue over his trembling lips. "Thirty-five."

"The price of a fix?" Piper wondered aloud, though he didn't believe the man was on heroin. "All right. Where's Courtney?"

"I seen him out at the River View Trailer Park. He's holed up with some dame."

"What's her name?"

He hesitated. "Trotter, I think. Like the horse."

Piper nodded. "If this is a wild goose chase I'll be back for my money. And your scalp."

He left the booth and headed for his car, walking fast. River View Trailer Park was ten miles south of the city, set high on a bluff overlooking the muddy Hudson. It took him a half hour to drive there through the afternoon traffic, and when he arrived he parked some distance away. The car had official state markings, which had caused him trouble more than once. He usually preferred his own vehicle, but there had been no time to get it today.

He moved almost silently in the crisp November air, walking between rows of trailers, avoiding an occasional screaming child and detouring around sagging clotheslines. The place seemed to slumber in its own particular silence. The trailer he sought was a long blue one with ruffled window curtains and the name *Trotter* over the bell. It seemed deserted, but he couldn't be sure.

He slipped the gun from his belt holster and stood to one side as he pressed the doorbell. For a full minute nothing happened. He rang again and waited. This time the door opened just a crack. It was far enough. He forced it open all the way and gazed at the startled face of Hugh Courtney.

The Englishman stepped back, raising his hands at the sight of the gun. "You won't need that," he said. "I'm quite tame, really."

"I don't gamble with killers. Back up."

"You're the one the papers call The Manhunter, aren't you? I'm honored." Close up, he was still handsome, but he seemed older than 34. The hair around the temples was graying and there were creases of age about the eyes.

"That's me," Piper admitted. Inside the trailer now, he risked a glance at the modest furnishings. "Where's the girl?"

"Carol's a nurse. She's at the hospital now, working. She should be home in an hour." His speech was almost fully Americanized, with only the slightest trace of British accent.

"All right. I'm taking you in."

The Englishman merely smiled. "Alone? Aren't you going to call for help?"

"I don't think I'll need it."

"I suppose it wouldn't do me any good to tell you I'm innocent of the murder charge."

"No good at all. A jury convicted you, and then you escaped. That's all I need to know."

Courtney stood there, hands raised, helpless. "Could I at least tell you about it, or are you only interested in my scalp? You American lawmen are an odd breed, really. You track down a person with all the persistence of a bloodhound, but rarely spend half as much effort in establishing the true facts of the case. If a chap has a record, he's as good as guilty in your eyes."

"You're quite a talker," Piper commented. "I suppose you have to be, in your business."

"Will you let me talk? Will you let me tell you how I got into this fix?"

Piper hesitated. Perhaps what Courtney said was true. Perhaps he'd become only a manhunter, without human feelings or compassion. "I'll make a trade with you," he said. "Tell me everything you know about the escape and I'll listen to your story."

"Fair enough," Courtney said, relaxing at once. "May I sit down?"

Piper motioned to a chair and sat down opposite. "No tricks now."

"My word of honor! You can put away the gun."

"The gun stays out. You're still a convicted murderer."

The Englishman sighed. "What do you want to know?"

"Exactly how it happened. Everything."

"I know very little, actually. I was in the county jail after sentencing, awaiting transfer to the penitentiary. With a murder conviction and a ten-to-twenty-year sentence I was rather expecting a car of my own to take me there. But this day they simply herded me out to the prison van with four other men. The girl sat up front, and I never saw her till later."

"What happened when the truck hit you?"

"Well, it was a closed van, so we couldn't tell too much. All we knew was that something rammed us broadside, and then one of the prisoners—I think it was Charlie Hall—grabbed the guard and started choking him. The others joined in, and the guy was probably dead even before the van was opened."

"Had you any prior knowledge of an escape attempt?"

"No, we just saw our chance and took it. The men who opened the van had gas masks and guns, and that was the first any of us realized it had been planned. I thought perhaps Nick Bruno had arranged it, but he seemed as surprised as the rest of us." He paused and glanced at the low coffee table between them. "May I have a cigarette?"

"No tricks. I'll hand it to you." Piper picked up a teak cigarette box with the single word *FRY* on its lid. It seemed much too good for its surroundings. He passed the Englishman a cigarette and urged him to continue. "Then what happened?"

"Well, they piled us all into a station wagon and drove a few blocks to where other cars were waiting. That's where we split up—two of us in each car, plus the driver. It was all carefully planned."

Piper frowned at the gun in his hand, as if just remembering it, and rested it on the arm of the chair. "Just how did you split up?"

"I went with Joe Reilly, Larner and the girl were together, and Bruno and Hall. I don't know what happened to the other four. We dropped Reilly at a motel across the line in Connecticut, and then the driver brought me back this way. I phoned Carol and came here."

"No reason was given for the escape? You weren't being recruited for any crime?"

"No, nothing like that." He drew on his cigarette. "That's all I know. Now you promised to listen to my story."

Piper nodded. "I'll listen, but I'm neither judge nor jury. Whatever I think in my own mind, you'll still have to go back to jail."

"Just listen, that's all I ask," Courtney begged. "I've been to the States before, and even served time in your prisons, but this current trip started about a year ago. I made a swing through a number of southern and midwestern states posing as an Anglican bishop collecting funds for the starving natives of East Africa and India."

"Aren't you a bit young for that role?"

The Englishman grinned. In that instant he certainly didn't look like a murderer. "A bit more gray about the temples and some extra lines on the face. They used to tell me back home that I had the look of a bishop. Angelic, you know. In any event, I was quite successful, as I usually am. In fact, I was probably more successful in my fund-raising than a real bishop would have been."

"What about the man you killed?"

"I didn't kill him, old chap," he explained, his accent suddenly thickening. "About six months back, while I was in Columbus, Ohio, some reporter started checking into my background. He became suspicious and cabled England. I had to leave town in a hurry. This other chap, Billings, had been nosing around, too. He was a disbarred lawyer who needed cash, and I suppose I looked like a meal ticket to him.

Anyway, he started tracking me down. I was flying to New York, but there was fog that night and my plane was diverted to the Raker County Airport. It seemed as good a place as any to hide out till things cooled down."

"What about this girl you're living with?"

"Carol Trotter is a nurse. She divorced her husband about a year ago, and stayed on living here. I met her at a bar and moved in about a month before Billings was killed. She's a nice girl."

"Nice enough to take in a killer?"

"Look, I didn't murder Billings, I tell you. He was following my trail from Columbus, checking the papers for speaking engagements by visiting bishops. After I'd been here with Carol for about a month, I began to feel restless and decided to raise some funds at the Episcopalian church here. It was a foolish thing to do, because I still had plenty of money left. Anyway, the day before my talk they had a tea for me at the rectory. Billings showed up, and threatened to expose me unless I paid him ten thousand dollars."

Piper whistled. "That's a lot of money."

"He said he figured I'd conned people out of a hundred thousand all together, and he wanted ten percent to keep quiet. He had written out all the charges against me in a letter, and threatened to send it to the police. I told him I'd think about it, and arranged to meet him the following evening at the church where I was speaking. I suppose you know the rest. He was shot and killed in an alleyway behind the church.

"The letter incriminating me was found in his hotel room, and I was arrested for the killing. There was no physical evidence against me, and the gun was never found, but my whole con game came out during the trial. They established motive and opportunity and that was all they needed. I had no alibi for the exact time of the killing, because I'd stepped outside the church to have a cigarette."

"You say you never met Billings that night?"

Courtney glanced away. "No, I didn't."

"If you weren't the one who shot him, who did?"

"Probably a stickup man."

"Was he robbed?"

"Well, his wallet was still there, but the robber might have taken some loose cash."

There was a noise at the door and Piper half turned, raising the gun as he did so. A girl in an open raincoat and nurse's uniform was letting herself in. She stopped, startled, at the sight of him. "Who are you?"

"It's all right, Carol," Courtney reassured her. "I knew they'd find me sooner or later."

She was a pretty girl, though there was a hardness about her eyes that seemed more than she might have been expected to acquire in hospital work. When she spoke her voice reflected this hardness, cutting through all pretense of cordiality. "He's innocent! Why in hell aren't you out finding the real killer?"

"The jury said he was the killer, Miss Trotter." Piper stood up. "And he is a self-admitted confidence man."

"I don't care what the jury said! He's not a murderer!"

"Even if the Billings murder is open to question, he could still be tried as an accessory in the killing of those prison-van guards."

The Englishman nodded and stood up, his face suddenly ashen. "You're well named, really—The Manhunter! All the emotions of a robot, or a bloodhound. Track them down and lock them up!"

"Come on," Piper said. "We've done enough talking."

The following morning Piper walked into Inspector Fleming's office unannounced, flopped into a chair, and waited while Fleming completed a phone call. "Tell me about Hugh Courtney," Piper asked finally.

"What's there to tell? He's back behind bars and we only have Bruno and the girl to go."

"I want to know about this killing he was convicted of. Did you investigate it?"

"Billings? Sure, it was my case. He was a disbarred lawyer who'd known Courtney in Ohio. He tried to shake him down for part of the loot and Courtney killed him. Simple as that."

"He told me the story, but he claims he's innocent of the murder."

"Don't they all?"

"I sort of believed him, Inspector."

Fleming snorted and shifted in his chair. "He's a confidence man, Mr. Piper, and one of the best around. If he could convince the congregations in all those cities that he was an Anglican bishop, I guess he could convince you he wasn't a murderer."

Piper had to admit some truth in that, and yet he was aware of a lingering doubt. Was Courtney right about Piper after all? Had he ever in his job paused to give a thought to the human condition? "All right," he told Fleming. "But could I look over the files on the case anyway? Something about the guy bothers me."

Fleming slid out of his chair and opened a file drawer. "Look, he had the only known motive, he was at the scene, and he had no alibi for the exact few minutes of the killing. Billings didn't know anyone else in town, and his wallet was still intact when we found him. That was enough to convince a jury, though I'll admit it might have gone either way. Another jury might have acquitted him for lack of any direct physical evidence."

"Yet you're convinced he was guilty. Why? Simply because there was no one else?"

"Partly that. Partly because you get a feeling about these things. An arresting officer can often tell by the suspect's attitude at the moment of arrest whether or not he's really guilty, but of course that's not the sort of thing you can mention in a courtroom."

David Piper took the file and glanced through the testimony. "Bishop" Courtney had arrived at the church around seven o'clock, a full hour before his scheduled fund-raising speech. He'd chatted with the minister and a few parishioners, and then disappeared for about fifteen or twenty minutes. He claimed he'd merely gone to the Men's Room but it was during this period that Billings had been shot dead in the alley next to the church. The weapon had never been found, and no one seemed to have heard the shot. The weapon had been pressed against Billings' coat, muffling the sound.

That was all. Short and simple. Courtney admitted that Billings was trying to shake him down, admitted even that he'd arranged the meeting with Billings. He denied killing the man or even seeing him.

"There's just nobody else," Fleming said, reading over his shoulder. "So it had to be Courtney."

Piper laid the file on the desk. He should have been satisfied, should have let it drop right there. His job was to find the last two—Nick Bruno and Kate Gallery—not to chase the will-o'-the-wisp of Courtney's crime. And yet there was something about the Englishman that invited belief—or at the very least a suspension of disbelief. Con man or not, maybe he deserved a few hours of Piper's time.

"Thanks," he told Fleming. "I'll be getting back to you."

The trailer park was full of morning activity when he arrived, in contrast to the quiet of the previous afternoon. It was a Saturday, with the children now very much in evidence, and Piper was gambling that it was also Carol Trotter's day off from the hospital. He was in luck. She answered his ring and was wearing dungarees and a faded sweatshirt.

"Didn't you do enough yesterday?" she asked, trying to close the door on him.

"This time I'm here to help."

"I'll bet!"

"Give me a chance, at least."

She paused, but made no effort to let him in. "Make it fast. I'm cleaning."

"You could be in a lot of trouble, harboring an escaped murderer."

"I've been in trouble all my life, mister."

She sounded as if she meant it. "I'm trying to help Courtney, or at least check out his story. Is there anyone else who knew about him, knew about his meeting with Billings?"

"No, no one."

"You knew, didn't you?"

She looked away. "Yes, I knew. Do you think he had me do his killing for him?"

He ignored that and asked, "What about when he came back here this week? Who knew he was hiding out here?"

"No one. He's never set foot out of the trailer. He figured this was a safe place because I was never mentioned during the trial."

Piper thought about this. Something was wrong, but he couldn't put his finger on it. "Do you know a one-eyed man named Tommy or a drug addict named Felix?"

"No."

He remembered something else. "How about an agent named Marc Litzen?" The theatrical agent had been associated with three of the other escapees, and perhaps he knew Courtney, too.

She shook her head. "I never heard the name."

"Did *you* ever see Billings?"

"Of course not! Hugh just told me about him, and about how he wanted money."

"Did Courtney say he was going to kill him?"

"No. He didn't kill him."

"All right," Piper sighed. "I guess that's all."

As he walked away from the trailer he knew she was still standing in the doorway, watching him.

Sheriff Barker personally led him to the visitors' room of the county jail. "Courtney should be down in a minute," Barker told him. "What's up? You got a line on the other two?"

Piper felt that he should say something to hide the real purpose of his visit. "Courtney talked a lot. One thing he told me was that the six split up after the escape. Bruno and Hall were in a car together. If Hall's murder was set up by someone who fed him sleeping pills, maybe it was done to silence him as to Bruno's whereabouts."

Barker nodded. "Could be."

The door at the far end of the drab room swung open and Courtney entered with a uniformed guard. Wearing a faded, ill-fitting prison uniform, the slim confidence man would hardly have passed for a bishop. He glanced at Piper and the Sheriff uncertainly as he sat down. "I'll want to talk to him alone," Piper said.

"He's already escaped once," Barker grumbled. "If you talk to him alone, you take full responsibility."

"All right."

Barker motioned the guard to wait outside and then followed him out. When they were alone, Piper said, "I'm trying to help you, Courtney, but it's difficult when you don't level with me. You lied about the night of the murder."

The Englishman's expression tightened into a frown. "What do you mean? I didn't kill him!"

"Perhaps not, but I think you met him in that alleyway. Look, Billings wanted money. You agreed to meet him. Either you were going to give him the money or you weren't. But if you weren't paying him off—if you were either planning to kill him or simply tell him to go to the devil—would you have agreed to meet him *at the church*, at the very place where he could denounce you and ruin your scheme? I think not.

"I'll admit to the slight possibility that you refused him the money and then had to kill him without premeditation when he threatened to enter the church and expose you—but the very presence of the gun shows there was a degree of premeditation. Certainly it's not a normal part of even a bogus bishop's gear. Sure, the gun might have been Billings' own, and you could have taken it away from him—but even this theory doesn't justify your setting up the meeting at the church if you had no intention of paying him the ten thousand. With so many safer places to meet, I can't believe you would have risked exposure.

"So it comes down to this: you would only have agreed to meet Billings at the church if you felt it was safe—and it would be perfectly safe only if you did plan to pay him off."

"Pretty smart thinking," Courtney conceded.

"So you did meet Billings in that alley, and you did pay him the money he demanded. That's what you were doing during those missing fifteen or twenty minutes. I said you wouldn't have killed Billings that close to the church and I stick with it. So when you left Billings he was still alive, with your money. Otherwise you never would have gone back in to give your speech and be arrested later by the police. You would have run, as you did in Ohio."

"All right. So it's true. What does that get me?"

"Don't you see, Courtney? The police didn't believe that robbery was the motive, but now we have Billings in that alley with ten thousand dollars—money which was *not* found on his body. So robbery *was* the motive after all." Piper shook his head in exasperation. "Why didn't you tell this at your trial?"

"Would they have believed me any more? It would only have placed me *in* the alleyway, actually *with* Billings, instead of in the church. My way, I figured I had a fifty-fifty chance with the jury. After all, I still couldn't produce anyone who knew I gave him the money."

"How about Carol Trotter?"

"Yes," he admitted. "She knew."

"Could she have killed him?"

Courtney shook his head. "Impossible. She'd wanted to see me as a bishop, and she was in the audience at the church that night. I saw her already in her seat when I came back from the alley, and she stayed there."

Piper's heart sank. It seemed like another dead end. "One more question. Who knew you were back at the trailer, hiding out? Who besides Carol?"

"No one. I stayed inside."

"Know any guys named Tommy or Fritz?"

"No."

It didn't make sense. But then, things rarely did in murder cases.

When Piper got back to the office, Susan glanced up from her typewriter. "Your wife's been calling from New York."

"No time for that now. I'll talk to her later." He sat down at his desk and brooded. Maybe this whole thing was a waste of time. Maybe Courtney had killed the guy after all. He sighed and picked up the phone and called the administrator of the hospital where Carol Trotter worked.

After the usual preliminaries he asked, "I need some information about one of your nurses—Miss Carol Trotter."

The administrator thought

for a moment. "I don't know them all personally, of course . . . But Trotter—yes, that's right. She went back to her maiden name after the divorce."

"That's the one. What can you tell me about her? Any recent or sudden show of wealth?"

"No, nothing like that." He paused, a bit uncertainly. "How frank should I be, Mr. Piper?"

"As frank as you can. This is a murder investigation."

"Well, we have the lady under investigation at present. A large quantity of coca shrub was stolen from our research lab. That's what cocaine is made from." He paused. "We're pretty certain she took it."

David Piper allowed himself to smile. There was only one more question he needed to ask.

It took him a few hours to get the address, and then another hour to assemble Inspector Fleming and a pair of uniformed officers. At just after eight o'clock that evening they broke down the door of Fritz Yomen's shabby little apartment. The unshaven man was curled on a daybed in one corner of the cluttered room, chewing on something that brought a blackish foam to the corners of his mouth. He reached futilely for a gun, but they pulled it away.

"What do you want?" he mumbled to Piper. "I told you everything."

"Not quite, Fritz. You didn't tell me you were Carol Trotter's ex-husband. And you didn't tell me you murdered a man named Billings."

He seemed to wither then, as Fleming warned him of his rights and snapped on the handcuffs. "Did Carol talk?" Yomen asked.

"She didn't need to. The hospital says she's been stealing raw coca shrub from the lab. Coca is a powerful narcotic, and chewing it turns the teeth green, just like yours. I should have known the first time I went to her trailer. There was a cigarette box with *FRY* engraved on its lid. It could have been a last name, but it was a lot more likely to be initials—her ex-husband's initials, since Trotter was her maiden name. I didn't know about the R for a middle initial, but I doubt like hell if anyone else connected with the case has F and Y for their first and last initials.

"When the hospital told me she was suspected of stealing drugs it all fitted together. It gave you a reason for still seeing her even after the divorce. I asked the hospital what her married name had been, and when they said Yomen I was sure you were the killer."

"Why's that?" Yomen managed to ask.

"There were two things nobody knew except Courtney and Carol—one, that he was going to pay off Billings in the alley by the church, and two, that he was hiding out at the trailer after his escape. Both Courtney and Carol denied telling anyone, and he certainly had no reason to lie to me. On the other hand, I knew she lied because she denied knowing a drug addict named Fritz and refused to admit you were her ex-husband.

"Since you knew about Courtney hiding out at the trailer, only Carol could have told you. If she told you that and denied it, it was a good possibility that she told you about the payment of the money in the alley, too. In fact, since Carol couldn't have killed Billings, it could only have been someone she told about the money."

"You think any jury will believe all that?" he asked.

Piper shook his head. "Not without some physical evidence, but I'm willing to bet that's the missing gun—the one Billings was shot with. Even with ten grand in his pocket a drug addict isn't likely to throw away a valuable gun."

"We'll check it out," Fleming said. "If you're right I guess Courtney owes you some thanks."

"He can thank me when he gets out of prison," Piper said. "I think that'll still be a good many years."

Piper reached the office before Susan the following morning, and found a stack of telephone messages on his desk. Several of them were from Jennie, his wife, in New York. That wasn't like her. Career-minded fashion designers didn't suddenly start worrying about middle-aged husbands they hardly ever saw.

He direct-dialed the number of her apartment on Central Park West, hoping she'd still be there. "Jennie? I've been very busy. This is the first chance I've had to return your calls."

Her voice was urgent and far away. "David, I must see you! My friend is here!"

"Your friend?" For a moment he didn't understand.

"The one I called about the other day. The girl who escaped from that prison van—Kate Gallery. She's here with me now and she has to see you. She knows something about the escape—and she's afraid, David. She's terribly afraid!"

(to be continued next month)

a *NEW* L-and-L larceny by

ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Another in the series of new stories about L and L, the two "lovable" con men—Lovell who knows more about art forgery than anyone else alive, and Lang who has an equally comprehensive knowledge about how to sell a forged painting for a handsome profit . . .

THE WALDEMEER TRIPTYCH

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

As I came through the door a clerk materialized from somewhere beyond the paintings that lined the walls and started forward to greet me. But then he took in my straight-off-the-rack suit and the flat newspaper-wrapped package under my arm and decided that anyone who so obviously couldn't afford the kind of prices the Browder Galleries commanded wasn't worth his attention. When I refused to dry up and blow away, he raised his eyebrows and turned his gaze on me as if he were just discovering I was there.

"Yes," he said with that polite insolence that only clerks in exclusive shops ever really master.

"My name's Lang," I said in the half-apologetic tone he'd expect. "I have an appointment with Mr. Browder."

The clerk's eyes were frankly skeptical, but after a moment he sighed and nodded his head to the left. "In his office," he said.

I thanked him, clutched the package tighter under my arm, and set off in the direction he had indicated. The clerk sniffed and went back to whatever he'd been doing before I came in.

There was a small door inconspicuously marked *Office* set in the far wall. I went through it without knocking, gave my name to the harried-looking middle-aged woman at the secretary's desk just inside, and waited while she buzzed

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Browder. When the box on her desk squawked back his permission for me to enter, she smiled tentatively and got up to open the inner door for me.

I was tempted to wink at her as I went by just to see the reaction I'd get. But that would have been out of the character I was trying to project, so I let it pass and went on into Browder's private office.

He looked up from behind his desk and measured me carefully as the clerk had done. And reached pretty much the same conclusion. But since he wasn't on salary plus commission and had more to lose if he were wrong, his reaction was less obvious.

"Yes, Mr. Lang?" he said. "What can I do for you?" He was a slight elderly man with a pinched face and bright restless eyes. What was left of his thinning gray hair had been let grow long on one side and combed carefully over the bald spot that stretched from his forehead to the nape of his neck. It was about as convincing as the friendliness he tried to put in his voice.

I cleared my throat. "Well," I said, "as I told you on the phone, my aunt died recently and I found this painting among her things." I put the package down on his desk and began to undo the wrappings. As usual Lovell, my partner, had used up at least half a roll of tape sealing it. I smiled apologetically at the mess I was making. "I don't know much about these things," I said. "But she'd had it for a long time and I thought it just might be valuable."

"Hmm," Browder said, not committing himself one way or the other. He waited until I had the wrappings completely off, then took the painting from me. It was a fairly conventional still life—assorted fruit and jugs—and was really notable only for the pattern of light and shade and the bold brilliant colors.

"Hmm," Browder said again, still not committing himself. He studied the painting closely, then flipped it over to inspect the back of the canvas. I'd been working with Lovell long enough now to recognize that Browder was checking the edges of the canvas and the condition of the wooden stretcher holding it taut. As he looked he made a clicking sound with his tongue that could have meant anything. But since the wooden stretcher had been carefully aged in potassium permanganate, the clicking sound probably meant nothing.

After a moment or two he flipped the painting over and without taking his eyes from it opened his desk drawer and took out a large magnifying glass. This he moved back and forth across the face of the picture, pausing now and then as a particular detail caught his eye.

I moved around behind him and peered over his shoulder. "What's that little squiggle down there in the corner?" I said, pointing.

Browder looked up at me obliquely. "That little 'squiggle,'" he said drily, "is the colophon used by Jan de Beck as a signature."

"Jan de Beck," I said breathlessly. "Then this thing must be worth a *lot* of money."

"It would be," Browder said, his voice drier than before, "if it was genuine. But this is a forgery." He moved the magnifying glass to cover a brightly decorated jug a little left of center. "You see that faience jug?" he said. "That's the giveaway. Back in the Seventeenth Century those jugs were as common as television sets today, and they show up in at least half of de Beck's paintings."

Browder put the magnifying glass down and looked at me disgustedly. "The shape of this jug is all wrong. It's too round and the handle's at an impossible angle for use. De Beck would no more have made that kind of mistake than a contemporary artist would paint a perfectly square TV screen."

I'd wondered how soon Browder was going to notice it. Now that he had I wet my lips and said quickly, "Now remember, I never said it was a de Beck. You're the one who brought it up, not me."

Browder smiled nastily. "That's right, my friend," he said. "But your protestation of innocence was just a shade too quick for an innocent man. You knew this was a fraud when you brought it in."

I let my eyes drop from his and said sullenly, "You'll never be able to prove that in court."

Browder's mouth twisted again. "Prove it?" he said. "Why should I want to prove it?" He transferred his gaze back to the painting. "Except for that one flaw—which only a handful of experts would spot—this is an excellent forgery." He pursed his lips and let his eyes wander over the painting. "I'll give you $500 for it."

"And sell it for ten times that," I said bitterly.

"No," Browder said, "I'll be lucky to get two or three thousand for it, because to cover myself in case anyone does notice the jug later, I'll have to describe it as a studio picture—or 'attributed to de

Beck.' " He took out a check book and poised his pen over it. "So," he said, "do you want the $500 or don't you?"

"I want it," I said. "But I'd prefer cash."

"I'm sure you would," Browder said, "but this check is my evidence that I bought this painting from you openly and in good faith." He gestured slightly with the pen. "Now how do I make this out?"

I shrugged and told him. He rapidly filled out the check, ripped it off the pad, and handed it to me. Then in an obvious gesture of dismissal he picked up the magnifying glass and began to inspect the painting once more.

When I didn't take the hint after a couple of minutes, Browder looked up again. "Was there something else?" he said coldly.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. "Well, yes," I said. I wet my lips. "I can get you other paintings like that."

Browder set the magnifying glass down to one side and regarded me thoughtfully. "Can you now?" he said slowly.

"Yes," I said, letting a little more assurance creep back into my voice. "I work partners with an artist named Lovell." I smiled and shrugged, half embarrassed. "Lovell's kind of a nut about some things," I said, "particularly the food he eats. But he does have a large if somewhat specialized talent. He can forge a painting by any artist living or dead and do it so well that most of the time the original artist himself would argue that it was genuine."

Lovell, if he ever got to hear about it, would never forgive me for that "most of the time." The quality of his work was the one thing you couldn't shake him on. But there was that small matter of the wrong-shaped jug to explain.

"Of course," I went on, smiling now even more confidently, "just to be on the safe side we generally stick to artists who are dead. Like Jan de Beck."

Browder nodded soberly. "I see," he said.

I'd thought he would; I'd researched Mr. Browder pretty carefully before approaching him in the first place. "Anyway," I went on, "Lovell mixes his own paints, using only the materials that would have been available to the original artist. And he has his own special method of 'aging' paintings, improved after the methods used by that Dutchman who passed off so many fake Old Masters on the Nazis."

"Very interesting," Browder said. Frowning, he bent back over the forged de Beck. I waited, but after a while when he still hadn't said anything more, I began to edge slowly toward the door. Browder let me almost get there. Then without looking up, he said, "Don't run off. I haven't finished with you yet."

Obediently I moved back to his desk.

Browder continued to study the painting thoughtfully. After another minute, he murmured half to himself, "My old mother always did say that when you had a job to do, the Lord would put the tools in your hand." He chuckled sardonically. "Although in this case maybe I should credit the devil." He put the painting aside and looked up. "Sit down, Mr. Lang," he said briskly. "I think I do have a job for your artist friend."

I pulled a chair around, sat down, and leaned forward eagerly. "Call me Harry," I said. "And what kind of a job?"

"All right, Harry," Browder said. He put his forearms on his desk and leaned forward himself, his hands clasped before him. "Do you know what a triptych is?" he said.

"Sure," I said. "It's a painting in three parts."

"More precisely," Browder said, "a set of paintings on three hinged panels."

I shrugged. "Have it your way," I said. "In any case, as I understand it, you want Lovell to paint a triptych."

Browder smiled bleakly. "More precisely," he repeated, "two panels of a particular triptych." He swiveled suddenly on his chair, pulled a book off the shelves lining the wall behind his desk, and began to leaf through it. Finding what he wanted, he swiveled back and laid the book before me. "That one, to be exact," he said, stabbing his bony forefinger at a full-page color plate.

I picked up the book and examined it more closely. The legend at the bottom of the plate identified the painting as Waldemeer's The Trials and Triumph of Job. All in all, it was pretty much what you'd expect, given that title and theme. So after a cursory glance or two I devoted my attention to the accompanying text.

"According to this," I said when I'd finished reading, "these paintings were part of the loot that the Nazis gathered out of occupied Europe during the second World War and were destroyed along with most of the rest of Berlin when the city fell to the Russians in 1945."

Browder regarded me with sly amusement. "That's what everyone has assumed," he said. "But one of the panels turned up recently."

"After all these years?" I said. I shook my head skeptically.

Browder shrugged. "Why not?" he said. "No one really knows all that happened in those last days of the war. And as recently as 1963 two paintings by Antonio Pallaiuolo, which were thought to have been in Berlin in 1945, turned up in California. I'm sure there would be more if it weren't for the fact that the original owners would immediately put in a claim for them.

"In any case it really doesn't matter whether the Waldemeer is genuine or not. The present owner believes it is and is convinced that the other two panels also exist—probably behind the Iron Curtain. And has commissioned me to get them."

"Why you?" I said bluntly.

Browder coughed delicately. "Because," he said, "I have in the past performed similar services for other collectors and have certain—er—contacts in Eastern Europe."

"I see," I said. "But you figure there's more profit in passing off a forgery."

"Precisely," Browder said. "Particularly since my contacts deny any knowledge of the Waldemeer triptych at all." He fixed his eyes on mine. "So do we have a deal?"

I nodded. "We have a deal," I said, "but it's going to cost you more than $500 a painting."

Browder showed his teeth in a shark's smile and we got down to the really important business. I asked for a 50-50 split, but of course Browder balked at that. And in the end we settled on 25% of the gross sales price as my share and Lovell's. Which was what I'd have asked for in the first place except I'd known he'd argue down from any figure I first named.

On my way out I *did* wink at Browder's secretary. She winked back. And that just goes to show that you never can tell about people.

"It's impossible," Lovell said flatly.

It was the afternoon following my visit to Browder's and the three of us—Browder, Lovell, and myself—were in a small café that Browder had decided would be a safe meeting place.

"It's impossible," Lovell repeated. "I just can't work from a photograph. There are too many things that don't show up—whether the surface is *impasto* or smooth, the exact type of paint used, the condition . . ." His voice trailed off under Browder's steady gaze.

Browder drummed with his

fingertips on the table and let the moment drag out. Finally he said, "I agree. In fact, I was rather surprised when your friend didn't bring it up yesterday."

Lovell gulped and blinked nervously. Browder turned his solemn stare on me. I shrugged.

"Lovell's the artist," I said, "not me. I have to leave that kind of thing to him."

Browder nodded slowly and turned back to Lovell. "The only problem is—how do we get the existing panel for you to work from?"

"Now there," I said, "is something I am an expert on. Just leave it to old Harry to take care of that little detail."

Browder hesitated, and I could guess what was going through his mind. He didn't want to introduce us to his client because then we might be tempted to make a deal on our own, freezing him out. On the other hand we had to have the one original panel to work from. He said at last, "We'll do it together."

"Suits me fine," I said. And we traded smiles of equal insincerity.

The apartment house was set off in a little park of its own with a clear view of the river on one side and the city skyline on the other. There was nothing sleek or modern or flashy about it—just that quiet elegance that spoke of generations of inherited wealth.

The interior matched the exterior, and I looked around with frank curiosity as Browder and I crossed the entrance lobby.

"Your client lives well," I said.

"What would you expect of someone who can afford to collect art on a large scale?" Browder said drily.

I nodded to show I conceded the point and followed him into the elevator.

The girl who opened the apartment door was young—no more than 25—with long blonde hair that looked as if it might be natural and an open, almost ingenuous expression. She looked blankly at us for a second, then smiled shyly in recognition. "Why, Mr. Browder," she said.

"Forgive me for dropping in on you unannounced like this, Miss Horgan," Browder said smoothly. "But I couldn't wait to tell you my news."

Miss Horgan's face lighted up like a beacon. "The other panels!" she exclaimed. "You've found them!"

Browder beamed back. "It appears we have," he said. Then his face sobered again. "Unfortunately, their condition has suffered somewhat as a result of the treatment they were given in 1945 and immediately thereafter."

"Oh, no!" Miss Horgan sounded so heartbroken that I was almost ready to cry with her.

"Now, now," Browder said soothingly. "It's nothing that can't be remedied and fortunately the face of the paintings hasn't been affected at all. But under the circumstances I felt we had better examine the panel you have to determine if it suffers from the same defect." He half turned to indicate me. "That's why I brought Mr. Lang along. Mr. Lang is an expert art restorer."

Miss Horgan looked at me anxiously.

Browder took her hand in his. "It's quite all right, my dear," he said. "We can trust Mr. Lang's discretion."

If there hadn't been a large amount of money involved, I would have been sick right to his face. As it was, though, I smiled reassuringly, and after a moment Miss Horgan smiled tentatively back.

She led us through a sumptuously furnished apartment to a sun-bright studio on the river side of the building. It was a casual room and the right-hand panel of The Trials and Triumph of Job looked curiously out of place on one wall.

"As soon as I have the other panels," Miss Horgan said, "I'm going to redecorate this room around them."

"Of course," Browder said, not really paying any attention to her. He nodded to me. "All right, Mr. Lang," he said.

I lifted the painting down from the wall carefully and pretended to poke at its back with the blade of a small penknife. Fortunately, like most paintings of its age and type, it had been painted on a wooden panel instead of on canvas. And after a moment or two I looked up and said with convincing authority, "I'm afraid the rot has set in on this one, too."

"Oh, no!" Miss Horgan wailed for the second time.

I turned to her and gave her another reassuring smile. "It's not that serious," I said. "The rot hasn't penetrated too deeply. So all we have to do is plane off the affected parts, seal it, and your painting's as good as new. Better, in fact. So, with your permission, I'll take it to my shop and have it back to you repaired before you even have time to miss it."

Miss Horgan's eyebrows drew together in a frown. "I just hate the thought of parting with it," she said. "Couldn't you do the work here?"

I took a deep breath, then blew it out again, as if I were considering her request. "I could," I said slowly. "But," I added, "I couldn't guarantee results—or that the painting itself wouldn't be damaged."

"In that case," Miss Horgan said hastily, "take it."

"That's right, my dear," Browder said unctuously. "Better safe than sorry."

We packed the painting in one of Miss Horgan's spare suitcases and Browder and I carried it downstairs in the elevator. Outside, he said, "That was easier than I expected."

I looked at him obliquely, then shrugged. "Most things are," I said, "once you make up your mind to do them."

"Perhaps," Browder said. He laid a bony hand on my arm. "There is one thing I want you to remember, though, my friend, in case you're thinking it would be easy to cheat me. I still have that forged de Beck you sold me *and* the canceled check. If you try anything funny, they both go to the police with a formal complaint." He chuckled complacently. "I'm sure you're an old hand at dodging the police, Harry. But an arrest warrant would at the least seriously cramp your style."

And with that happy thought between us we drove back to town.

Browder dropped by twice while Lovell was working on the paintings. The first time Lovell had just started to plane down the back of the original panel. There was no rot of course, but having told Miss Horgan that was what we were going to do, we had to carry through.

"Careful you don't damage that," Browder said.

"If I do," Lovell replied haughtily, "I'll paint you another just like it."

Browder snorted and left.

The second time the paintings themselves were finished and Lovell was in the process of testing to see if the first coat of varnish had dried sufficiently hard. But when Browder came in, he stopped and set the paintings up for Browder to inspect.

Browder looked them over critically, then shook his head. "They don't look right," he said.

"Of course not," Lovell said. "They're still too clean." He took the paintings down off their easels, laid them flat, and before Browder's astonished gaze poured a bottle of black ink over them.

Lovell gave the ink a minute

or so to seep down into the networks of cracks that he had carefully nurtured across the face of the paintings in imitation of the genuine aging process. Then he set to work to mop up the excess ink with a towel. When he was finished, the result was very like the accumulation of dirt that builds up over the years in a genuine work of art.

"How's that?" Lovell said proudly, sure of his answer.

It was grudging, but finally Browder nodded his approval. "How much longer before they're ready?" he said.

"A couple of days," Lovell said. "They need another coat of varnish and we have to give it time to harden thoroughly."

Browder nodded again and left. I closed the door after him, then turned to lean against it and give Lovell an "O" sign with my thumb and forefinger. But he had already gone back to getting the paintings ready for revarnishing.

Right on time three days later I delivered the paintings to Browder. It was after hours, so none of his regular employees would be around to witness the transfer. But Miss Horgan was there.

She was beaming like an excited child on its birthday. "I've been pestering Mr. Browder about the paintings ever since I knew they were available. And I was just lucky enough to be here when you called to say you had finished your repairs and were bringing them over."

"That was lucky," I said.

Browder smiled insincerely and helped me remove the protective packing and set the paintings up for Miss Horgan to admire.

"Oh," she said, clapping her hands together, "aren't they lovely?"

"Yes," Browder said, "indeed they are. But we mustn't detain Mr. Lang any longer. It's getting late and—"

"That's all right," I said cheerfully, realizing what Browder was driving at. He wanted me out of there before the price was mentioned so that he could cut the price in half before arriving at our 25%. "I don't mind at all."

Before Browder could say anything more, I made quite a show of turning the pictures over and explaining the "repairs" to Miss Horgan. She kept nodding politely as I spoke, but her heart obviously wasn't in it. And as soon as I paused she turned eagerly to Browder.

"We might as well get everything settled now," she said. "$200,000 was the price agreed on, wasn't it?"

Browder winced, but recovered smoothly and even managed to drag up a smile from somewhere. "That's right," he said.

Miss Horgan sat down in the chair beside Browder's desk and took an alligator-bound check book from her purse. "I'll give you a check now to close the deal," she said. She wrote swiftly, tore the completed check from the pad, and held it out to Browder. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to wait a day or so before cashing this, though," she said, smiling apologetically. "Just until I have time to transfer sufficient funds into my checking account."

"Quite all right," Browder said, smiling in return. He took the check from her and held it clutched in his hand, waist high. "I'll have the paintings repacked and delivered."

"Fine," Miss Horgan said. She stood up. "Well," she said, "I guess that takes care of everything, doesn't it?"

Unconsciously, Browder's fingers caressed the check lightly. "It does indeed," he said.

Miss Horgan shook hands with each of us, then left.

As soon as the door was shut behind her, I turned to Browder and rubbed my thumb rapidly over the first two fingers of my left hand. "$50,000," I said. "And this time I'll take it in cash."

Browder nodded soberly. "Under the circumstances," he said, "I agree." He went to the wall, swung out a picture to reveal a safe behind it, and after a quick glance back to make sure I wasn't watching, he spun the dial rapidly through the combination and pulled the door open.

He took out several thick packets of bills, glanced at them briefly, then handed them to me. I didn't think he'd risk a short count but just to make sure I riffled through them quickly before sticking them in my pocket. The $50,000 was all there.

"Satisfied?" Browder said drily.

"I would be," I said, "if I had that canceled check from the previous sale, too."

Browder hesitated for a second. Then he shrugged and turned to the safe again. A moment later he came back and handed me the canceled check. I stuck it in my pocket with the packets of bills.

"Keep in touch," Browder said. "You never know when something like this will turn up again."

I promised I would and left. We didn't shake hands.

The car was parked two

blocks away. I walked around it and got in on the right-hand side. Miss Horgan, behind the wheel, smiled at me sardonically. "What kept you so long?" she said.

"A few minor details," I said. "Like getting the money."

Her smile broadened. "Speaking of money," she said and held out her hand.

I counted out $15,000 and handed it to her. "One third of the profits," I said, "after deducting the expenses of painting the panel you used to bait Browder and the other two he sold you. Not to mention a month's sublease on that gilded cage you called an apartment."

Miss Horgan put the money in her purse and sighed. "I'm going to miss that apartment," she said. "But under the circumstances I imagine it would be best for all of us if we were long gone when Browder tries to cash that check."

I smiled, remembering how Browder had used the same phrase. "Under the circumstances," I said, "I agree."

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a PARKER PYNE detective story by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

Mr. Parker Pyne liked to call himself "a specialist in unhappiness." He was also a specialist in curing unhappiness—which made him a special kind of detective. And surely the disappearance of the Morning Star, a diamond worth £30,000, was the cause of extreme unhappiness—at least, to its owner and to anyone suspected of the crime. Yet that's what happened: in front of eyewitnesses the diamond vanished from a locked room—and none of the witnesses had left the room!. . .

THE REGATTA MYSTERY

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

MR. POINTZ REMOVED a cigar from his lips and said approvingly, "Pretty little place."

Having thus set the seal of his approval on Dartmouth harbor, he replaced the cigar and looked about him with the air of a man pleased with himself, his appearance, his surroundings, and life generally.

As regards the first of these, Mr. Pointz was a man of 58, in good health and condition with perhaps a slight tendency to liver. He was not exactly stout, but comfortable-looking, and a yachting costume, which he wore at the moment, is not the most kindly of attires for a middle-aged man with a tendency to embonpoint. Mr. Pointz was very well turned out—correct to every crease and button—his dark and slightly Oriental face beaming out under the peak of his yachting cap.

As regards his surroundings, these may have been taken to mean his companions—his partner Mr. Leo Slade, Sir George and Lady Marroway, an American business acquaintance named Samuel Leathern and his schoolgirl daughter Eve, Mrs. Rustington, and Evan Llewellyn.

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The party had just come ashore from Mr. Pointz's yacht, the *Merrimaid*. In the morning they had watched the yacht racing and they had now come ashore to join for a while in the fun of the fair—coconut shies, Fat Ladies, the Human Spider, and the merry-go-round. It is hardly to be doubted that these delights were relished most by Eve Leathern. When Mr. Pointz finally suggested that it was time to adjourn to the Royal George for dinner, hers was the only dissenting voice.

"Oh, Mr. Pointz, I did so want to have my fortune told by the Real Gypsy in the Caravan."

Mr. Pointz had doubts of the essential Realness of the Gypsy in question but he gave indulgent assent.

"Eve's just crazy about the fair," said her father apologetically. "But don't you pay any attention if you want to be getting along."

"Plenty of time," said Mr. Pointz benignly. "Let the little lady enjoy herself. I'll take you on at darts, Leo."

"Twenty-five and over wins a prize," chanted the man in charge of the darts in a high nasal voice.

"Bet you a fiver my total score beats yours," said Pointz.

"Done," said Slade with alacrity.

The two men were soon whole-heartedly engaged in their battle.

Lady Marroway murmured to Evan Llewellyn, "Eve is not the only child in the party."

Llewellyn smiled assent but somewhat absently.

He had been absent-minded all that day. Once or twice his answers had been wide of the point.

Pamela Marroway drew away from him and said to her husband, "That young man has something on his mind."

Sir George murmured, "Or someone?"

And his glance swept quickly over Janet Rustington.

Lady Marroway frowned a little. She was a tall woman exquisitely groomed. The scarlet of her fingernails was matched by the dark coral studs in her ears. Her eyes were dark and watchful. Sir George affected a careless "hearty English gentleman" manner—but his bright blue eyes held the same watchful look as his wife's.

Messrs. Pointz and Slade were Hatton Garden diamond merchants. Sir George and Lady Marroway came from a different world—the world of Antibes and Juan les Pins—of golf at St.-Jean-de-Luz—of bathing from the rocks at Madeira in the winter.

In outward seeming they were as the lilies that toiled not, neither did they spin. But perhaps this was not quite true. There are divers ways of toiling and also of spinning.

"Here's the kid back again," said Evan Llewellyn to Mrs. Rustington.

He was a dark young man—there was a faintly hungry wolfish look about him which some women found attractive.

It was difficult to say whether Mrs. Rustington found him so. She did not wear her heart on her sleeve. She had married young—and the marriage had ended in disaster in less than a year. Since that time it was difficult to know what Janet Rustington thought of anyone or anything—her manner was always the same—charming but completely aloof.

Eve Leathern came dancing up to them, her fair hair bobbing excitedly. She was fifteen—an awkward child—but full of vitality.

"I'm going to be married by the time I'm seventeen," she exclaimed breathlessly. "To a very rich man and we're going to have six children and Tuesdays and Thursdays are my lucky days and I ought always to wear green or blue and an emerald is my lucky stone and—"

"Why, pet, I think we ought to be getting along," said her father.

Mr. Leathern was a tall, fair, dyspeptic-looking man with a somewhat mournful expression.

Mr. Pointz and Mr. Slade were turning away from the darts. Mr. Pointz was chuckling and Mr. Slade was looking somewhat rueful.

"It's all a matter of luck," he was saying.

Mr. Pointz slapped his pocket cheerfully.

"Took a fiver off you all right. Skill, my boy, skill. My old Dad was a first-class dart player. Well, folks, let's be getting along. Had your fortune told, Eve? Did they tell you to beware of a dark man?"

"A dark woman," corrected Eve. "She's got a cast in her eye and she'll be real mean to me if I give her a chance. And I'm to be married by the time I'm seventeen."

She ran on happily as the party steered its way to the Royal George.

Dinner had been ordered beforehand by Mr. Pointz, and a bowing waiter led them upstairs and into a private room on the first floor. Here a round table was ready laid. The big bulging bay window faced the harbor square and was open. The noise of the fair came up to them, and the raucous squeal of three roundabouts.

"Best shut that if we're to hear ourselves speak," observed Mr. Pointz drily, and suited the action to the word.

They took their seats round the table and Mr. Pointz beamed affectionately at his guests. He felt he was doing them well and he liked to do people well. His eye rested on one after another. Lady Marroway—fine woman—not quite the goods, of course, he knew that—he was perfectly well aware that what he had called all his life the *creme de la creme* would have very little to do with the Marroways—but then the *creme de la creme* were supremely unaware of his own existence. Anyway, Lady Marroway was a damned smart-looking woman—and he didn't mind if she *did* rook him a bit at bridge. Didn't enjoy it quite so much from Sir George. Fishy eye the fellow had. Brazenly on the make. But he wouldn't make too much out of Mr. Pointz. He'd see to that all right.

Old Leathern wasn't a bad fellow—long-winded, of course, like most Americans—fond of telling endless stories. And he had that disconcerting habit of requiring precise information. What was the population of Dartmouth? In what year had the Naval College been built? And so on. Expected his host to be a kind of walking Baedeker. Eve was a nice cheery kid—he enjoyed chaffing her. Voice rather like a corncrake, but she had all her wits about her. A bright kid.

Young Llewellyn—he seemed a bit quiet. Looked as though he had something on his mind. Hard up, probably. These writing fellows usually were. Looked as though he might be keen on Janet Rustington. A nice woman—attractive and clever, too. But she didn't ram her writing down your throat. Highbrow sort of stuff she wrote but you'd never think it to hear her talk.

And old Leo! *He* wasn't getting younger or thinner. And blissfully unaware that his partner was at that moment thinking precisely the same thing about him, Mr. Pointz corrected Mr. Leathern as to pilchards being connected with Devon and not Cornwall, and prepared to enjoy his dinner.

"Mr. Pointz," said Eve when plates of hot mackerel had been set before them and the waiters had left the room.

"Yes, young lady."

"Have you got that big diamond with you right now? The one you showed us last night and said you always took with you?"

Mr. Pointz chuckled. "That's right. My mascot, I call it. Yes, I've got it with me all right."

"I think that's awfully dangerous. Somebody might get it away from you in the crowd."

"Not they," said Mr. Pointz. "I'll take good care of that."

"But they *might*," insisted Eve. "You've got gangsters in England as well as we have, haven't you?"

"They won't get the Morning Star," said Mr. Pointz. "To begin with it's in a special inner pocket. And anyway, old Pointz knows what he's about. Nobody's going to steal the Morning Star."

Eve laughed. "Uh-huh—bet I could steal it!"

"I bet you couldn't," Mr. Pointz twinkled back at her.

"Well, I bet I could. I was thinking about it last night in bed—after you'd handed it round the table for us all to look at. I thought of a real cute way to steal it."

"And what's that?"

Eve put her head on one side, her fair hair wagging excitedly. "I'm not telling you—now. What do you bet I couldn't?"

Memories of Mr. Pointz's youth rose in his mind.

"Half a dozen pairs of gloves," he said.

"Gloves," cried Eve disgustedly. "Who wears gloves?"

"Well—do you wear silk stockings?"

"Don't I though! My best pair laddered this morning."

"Very well, then. Half a dozen pairs of the finest stockings—"

"Oo-er," said Eve blissfully. "And what about you?"

"Well, I need a new tobacco pouch."

"Right. That's a deal. Not that you'll get your tobacco pouch. Now I'll tell you what you've got to do. You must hand it round like you did last night—"

She broke off as two waiters entered to remove the plates. When they were starting on the next course of chicken, Mr. Pointz said, "Remember, young woman, if this is to represent a real theft, I should send for the police and you'd be searched."

"That's okay by me. But you needn't be quite so lifelike as to bring the police into it. Lady Marroway or Mrs. Rustington can do all the searching you like."

"Well, that's that then," said Mr. Pointz. "What are you setting up to be? A first-class jewel thief?"

"I might take to it as a career—if it really paid."

"If you got away with the Morning Star it would pay you. Even after recutting that stone would be worth over thirty thousand pounds."

"My!" said Eve, impressed.

"What's that in dollars?"

Lady Marroway uttered an exclamation.

"And you carry such a stone about with you?" she said reproachfully. "Thirty thousand pounds." Her darkened eyelashes quivered.

Mrs. Rustington said softly, "It's a lot of money. And then there's the fascination of the stone itself. It's beautiful."

"Just a piece of carbon," said Evan Llewellyn.

"I've always understood it's the 'fence' that's the difficulty in jewel robberies," said Sir George. "He takes the lion's share—eh, what?"

"Come on," said Eve excitedly. "Let's start. Take the diamond out and say what you said last night."

Mr. Leathern said in his deep melancholy voice, "I do apologize for my offspring. She gets kind of worked up—"

"That'll do, Pops," said Eve. "Now then, Mr. Pointz—"

Smiling, Mr. Pointz fumbled in an inner pocket. He drew something out. It lay on the palm of his hand, blinking in the light.

A diamond.

Rather stiffly, Mr. Pointz repeated as far as he could remember his speech of the previous evening on the *Merrimaid.*

"Perhaps you ladies and gentlemen would like to have a look at this? It's an unusually beautiful stone. I call it the Morning Star and it's by way of being my mascot—goes with me everywhere. Like to see it?"

He handed it to Lady Marroway, who took it, exclaimed at its beauty and passed it to Mr. Leathern who said, "Pretty good—yes, pretty good," in a somewhat artificial manner, and in his turn passed it to Llewellyn.

The waiters came in at that moment and there was a slight hitch in the proceedings. When they had gone again, Evan said, "Very fine stone" and passed it to Leo Slade who did not trouble to make any comment but handed it quickly on to Eve.

"How perfectly lovely," cried Eve in a high affected voice. "Oh!" She gave a cry of consternation as it slipped from her hand. "I've dropped it."

She pushed back her chair and got down to grope under the table. Sir George, at her right, bent also. A glass got swept off the table in the confusion. Slade, Llewellyn, and Mrs. Rustington all helped in the search. Finally Lady Marroway joined in.

Only Mr. Pointz took no part in the proceedings. He remained in his seat sipping his wine and smiling sardonically.

"Oh, dear," said Eve, still in her artificial manner. "How dreadful! Where *can* it have rolled to? I can't find it."

One by one the assistant searchers rose to their feet.

"It's disappeared all right, Pointz," said Sir George, smiling.

"Very nicely done," said Mr. Pointz, nodding approval. "You'd make a very good actress, Eve. Now the question is, have you hidden it somewhere or have you got it on you?"

"Search me," said Eve dramatically.

Mr. Pointz's eye sought out a large screen in the corner of the room. He nodded toward it and then looked at Lady Marroway and Mrs. Rustington. "If you ladies will be so good—"

"Why, certainly," said Lady Marroway, smiling.

The two women rose.

Lady Marroway said, "Don't be afraid, Mr. Pointz. We'll vet her properly."

The three went behind the screen.

The room was hot. Evan Llewellyn flung open the window. A newsvender was passing. Evan threw down a coin and the man threw up a paper.

Llewellyn unfolded it.

"Hungarian situation's none too good," he said.

"That the local rag?" asked Sir George. "There's a horse I'm interested in ought to have run at Haldon today—Natty Boy."

"Leo," said Mr. Pointz. "Lock the door. We don't want those waiters popping in and out till this business is over."

"Natty Boy won three to one," said Evan.

"Rotten odds," said Sir George.

"Mostly Regatta news," said Evan, glancing over the sheet.

The three young women came out from the screen.

"Not a sign of it," said Janet Rustington.

"You can take it from me she hasn't got it on her," said Lady Marroway.

Mr. Pointz thought he would be quite ready to take it from her. There was a grim tone in her voice and he felt that the search had been thorough.

"Say, Eve, you haven't swallowed it?" asked Mr. Leathern anxiously. "Because maybe that wouldn't be too good for you."

"I'd have seen her do that," said Leo Slade quietly. "I was watching her. She didn't put anything in her mouth."

"I couldn't swallow a great big thing all points like that," said Eve. She put her hands on her hips and looked at Mr. Pointz. "What about it, big boy?" she asked.

"You stand over there where you are and don't move," said that gentleman.

Among them, the men stripped the table and turned it upside down. Mr. Pointz examined every inch of it. Then he transferred his attention to the chair on which Eve had been sitting and those on either side of her.

The thoroughness of the search left nothing to be desired. The other four men joined in and the women also. Eve Leathern stood by the wall near the screen and laughed with intense enjoyment.

Five minutes later Mr. Pointz rose with a slight groan from his knees and dusted his trousers sadly. His pristine freshness was somewhat impaired.

"Eve," he said. "I take off my hat to you. You're the finest thing in jewel thieves I've ever come across. What you've done with that stone beats me. As far as I can see it must be in the room since it isn't on you. I give you best."

"Are the stockings mine?" demanded Eve.

"They're yours, young lady."

"Eve, my child, where *can* you have hidden it?" demanded Mrs. Rustington curiously.

Eve pranced forward. "I'll show you. You'll all be furious with yourselves."

She went across to the side table where the things from the dinner table had been roughly stacked. She picked up her little black evening bag—

"Right under your eyes. Right—"

Her voice, gay and triumphant, trailed off suddenly.

"Oh," she said. "*Oh!*"

"What's the matter, honey?" said her father.

Eve whispered, "It's gone . . . it's *gone*. . ."

"What's all this?" asked Pointz, coming forward.

Eve turned to him impetuously.

"It was like this. This bag of mine has a big paste stone in the middle of the clasp. It fell out last night and just when you were showing that diamond round I noticed that it was much the same size. And so I thought in the night what a good idea for a robbery it would be to wedge your diamond into the gap with a bit of plasticine. I felt sure nobody would ever spot it.

"That's what I did tonight. First I dropped it—then went down after it with the bag in my hand, stuck it into the gap with a bit of plasticine which I had handy, put my bag on the table, and went on pretending to look for the diamond. I thought it would be like the Purloined Letter—you know—

lying there in full view under all your noses—and just looking like a common bit of rhinestone. And it was a good plan—none of you *did* notice."

"I wonder," murmured Mr. Slade.

Mr. Pointz took the bag, looked at the empty hole with a fragment of plasticine still adhering to it, and said slowly, "It may have fallen out. We'd better look again."

The search was repeated, but this time it was a curiously silent business. An atmosphere of tension pervaded the room.

Finally everyone in turn gave it up. They stood looking at each other.

"It's not in this room," said Slade.

"And nobody's left the room," said Sir George significantly.

There was a moment's pause. Eve burst into tears.

Her father patted her on the shoulder.

"There, there," he said awkwardly.

Sir George turned to Leo Slade.

"Mr. Slade," he said. "Just now you murmured something under your breath. But I heard what you said. Miss Eve had just said that none of us noticed the place where she had put the diamond. The words you murmured were: 'I wonder.' What we have to face is the probability that one person *did* notice, and that person is in this room now. I suggest that the only fair and honorable thing is for everyone present to submit to a search. The diamond cannot have left the room."

When Sir George played the part of the old English gentleman, none could play it better. His voice rang with sincerity and indignation.

"Bit unpleasant, all this," said Mr. Pointz unhappily.

"It's all my fault," sobbed Eve. "I didn't mean—"

"Buck up," said Mr. Slade. "Nobody's blaming you."

Mr. Leathern said in his slow pedantic manner, "Why, certainly, I think that Sir George's suggestion will meet with the fullest approval from all of us. It does from me."

"I agree," said Evan Llewellyn.

Mrs. Rustington looked at Lady Marroway who nodded a brief assent. The two went behind the screen and the sobbing Eve accompanied them.

A waiter knocked on the door and was told to go away.

Five minutes later eight people looked at each other incredulously.

The Morning Star had vanished. . .

Mr. Parker Pyne looked

thoughtfully at the dark agitated face of the young man opposite him.

"Of course," he said, nodding. "You're Welsh, Mr. Llewellyn."

"What's that got to do with it?"

Mr. Parker Pyne waved a large, well-cared-for hand.

"Nothing at all, I admit. I am interested in the classification of emotional reactions as exemplified by certain racial types. That is all. Let us return to the consideration of your particular problem."

"I don't really know why I came to you," said Evan Llewellyn. His hands twitched nervously, and his dark face had a haggard look. He did not look at Mr. Parker Pyne and that gentleman's scrutiny seemed to make him uncomfortable. "I don't know why I came to you," he repeated. "But where the hell *can* I go? And what the hell can I *do?* It's the powerlessness of not being able to do anything at all that gets me. . . I saw your advertisement and I remembered that a chap had once spoken of you and said that you got results. . .And—well—I came! I suppose I was a fool. It's the sort of position nobody can do anything about."

"Not at all," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "I am the proper person to come to. I am a specialist in unhappiness. This business has obviously caused you a good deal of pain. You are sure the facts are exactly as you have told me?"

"I don't think I've left out anything. Pointz brought out the diamond and passed it around. That wretched American child stuck it on her ridiculous bag and when we came to look at the bag, the diamond was gone. It wasn't on anyone—even old Pointz himself was searched—he suggested it—and I'll swear it was nowhere in that room! *And nobody left the room*—"

"No waiters, for instance?" suggested Mr. Parker Pyne.

Llewellyn shook his head. "They went out before the girl began messing about with the diamond, and afterwards Pointz locked the door so as to keep them out. No, it's one of us."

"It would certainly seem so," said Mr. Parker Pyne thoughtfully.

"That damned evening paper," said Evan Llewellyn. "I saw it come into their minds—that that was the only way—"

"Just tell me again exactly what occurred."

"It was perfectly simple. I opened the window, whistled to the man, threw down a copper, and he tossed up the paper. And there it is, you see—the only possible way the diamond could have left the room—thrown by me to an accomplice waiting in the street below."

"Not the *only* possible way," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"What other way can you suggest?"

"If you didn't throw it out, there *must* have been some other way."

"Oh, I see. I hoped you meant something more definite than that. Well, I can only say that I *didn't* throw it out. I can't expect you to believe me—or anyone else."

"Oh, yes, I believe you," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"You do? Why?"

"Not a criminal type," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "Not, that is, the particular criminal type that steals jewelry. There are crimes, of course, that you might commit—but we won't enter into that subject. At any rate, I do not see you as the purloiner of the Morning Star."

"Everyone else does though," said Llewellyn bitterly.

"I see," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"They looked at me in a queer sort of way at the time. Marroway picked up the paper and just glanced over at the window. He didn't say anything. But Pointz cottoned to it quick enough! I could see what they thought. There hasn't been any open accusation, that's the devil of it."

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded sympathetically.

"It is worse than that?" he asked.

"Yes. I've had a fellow round asking questions—routine inquiries, he called it. One of the new dress-shirted police, I suppose. Very tactful—nothing at all hinted. Just interested in the fact that I'd been hard up and was suddenly cutting a bit of a splash."

"And were you?"

"Yes—some luck with a horse or two. Unluckily my bets were made on the course—there's nothing to show that's how the money came in. They can't disprove it, of course—but that's just the sort of easy lie a fellow would invent if he didn't want to show where the money came from."

"I agree. Still they will have to have a good deal more than that to go on."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of actually being arrested and charged with the theft. In a way that would be easier—one would know where one was. It's the ghastly fact that all those people *believe* I took it."

"One person in particular?"

"What do you mean?"

"A suggestion—nothing more—" Again Mr. Parker Pyne waved his comfortable-looking hand. "There *was* one person in particular, wasn't there? Shall we say Mrs. Rustington?"

Llewellyn's dark face flushed. "Why pitch on her?"

"Oh, my dear sir—there is obviously someone whose opinion matters to you greatly—probably a lady. What ladies were there? An American flapper? Lady Marroway? But you would probably rise not fall in Lady Marroway's estimation if you had brought off such a coup. I know something of the lady. Clearly then, Mrs. Rustington."

Llewellyn said with something of an effort, "She—she's had rather an unfortunate experience. Her husband was a down-and-out rotter. It's made her unwilling to trust anyone. She—if she thinks—"

He found it difficult to go on.

"Quite so," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "I see the matter must be cleared up."

Evan gave a short laugh. "That's easy to say."

"And quite easy to do," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"You think so?"

"Oh, yes, the problem is so clear-cut. So many possibilities are ruled out. The answer must really be extremely simple. Indeed, already I have a kind of glimmering—"

Llewellyn stared at him incredulously.

Mr. Parker Pyne drew a pad of paper toward him and picked up a pen.

"Perhaps you would give me a brief description of the party."

"Haven't I already done so?"

"Their personal appearance—color of hair and so on."

"But Mr. Parker Pyne, what can that have to do with it?"

"A good deal, young man, a good deal. Classification and so on."

Somewhat unbelievingly, Evan described the personal appearance of the members of the yachting party.

Mr. Parker Pyne made a note or two, pushed away the pad, and said, "Excellent. By the way, did you say a wine glass was broken?"

Evan stared again. "Yes, it was knocked off the table and then it got stepped on."

"Whose wine glass was it?" asked Mr. Parker Pyne.

"I think it was the child's—Eve."

"Ah—and who sat next to her on that side?"

"Sir George Marroway."

"You didn't see which of them knocked it off the table?"

"Afraid I didn't. Does it matter?"

"Not really. No. That was a superfluous question. Well"—he stood up—"good morning, Mr. Llewellyn. Will you call again in three days' time? I think the whole thing will be quite satisfactorily cleared up by then."

"Are you joking, Mr. Pyne?"

"I never joke on professional matters, my dear sir. It would occasion distrust in my clients. Shall we say Friday at 11:30? Thank you."

Evan entered Mr. Parker Pyne's office on Friday morning in a considerable turmoil. Hope and skepticism fought for mastery.

Mr. Parker Pyne rose to meet him with a beaming smile.

"Good morning, Mr. Llewellyn. Sit down. Have a cigarette?"

Llewellyn waved aside the proffered box.

"Well?" he said.

"Very well indeed," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "The police arrested the gang last night."

"The gang? What gang?"

"The Amalfi gang. I thought of them at once when you told me your story. I recognized their methods and once you had described the guests—well, there was no doubt at all in my mind."

"Who are the Amalfi gang?"

"Father, son, and daughter-in-law—that is, if Pietro and Maria are really married—which some doubt."

"I don't understand."

"It's quite simple. The name is Italian and no doubt the origin is Italian, but old Amalfi was born in America. His methods are usually the same. He impersonates a real business-man, introduces himself to some prominent figure in the jewel business in some European country, and then plays his little trick. In this case he was deliberately on the track of the Morning Star. Pointz's idiosyncrasy was well-known in the trade. Maria Amalfi played the part of his daughter—amazing creature, twenty-seven at least, and nearly always plays a part of sixteen."

"Not Eve!" gasped Llewellyn.

"Exactly. The third member of the gang got himself taken on as a waiter at the Royal George—it was holiday time, remember, and they would need extra staff. He may even have bribed a regular man to stay away. The scene is set. Eve challenges old Pointz and he takes on the bet. He passes round the diamond as he had done the night before. The waiters enter the room and Leathern retains the stone until they leave the room. When they leave, the diamond leaves also, neatly attached with a morsel of chewing gum to the underside of the plate that Pietro bears away. So simple!"

"But I *saw* it after that."

"No, no, you saw a paste replica, good enough to deceive a casual glance. Slade, you told me, hardly looked at it. Eve drops it, sweeps off a glass too, then steps firmly on stone and glass together. Diamond among splinters of glass. Miraculous disappearance of diamond. Both Eve and Leathern can submit to as much searching as anyone pleases."

"Well—I'm—" Evan shook his head, at a loss for words.

"You say you recognized the gang from my description. Had they worked this trick before?"

"Not exactly—but it was their kind of business. Naturally my attention was at once directed to the girl Eve."

"Why? I didn't suspect her—nobody did. She seemed such a—such a *child.*"

"That is the peculiar genius of Maria Amalfi. She is more like a child than any child could possibly be! And then the plasticine! This bet was supposed to have arisen quite spontaneously—yet the little lady had some plasticine with her all handy. That spoke of premeditation. My suspicions fastened on her at once."

Llewellyn rose to his feet.

"Well, Mr. Parker Pyne, I'm no end obliged to you."

"Classification," murmured Mr. Parker Pyne. "The classification of criminal types—it interests me."

"You'll let me know how much—er—"

"My fee will be quite moderate," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "It will not make too big a hole in the—er—horse-racing profits. All the same, young man, I should, I think, leave the horses alone in the future. Very uncertain animal, the horse."

"That's right," said Evan.

He shook Mr. Parker Pyne by the hand and strode from the office.

He hailed a taxi and gave the address of Janet Rustington's flat.

He felt in a mood to carry all before them.

THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

In attempting to trace the origin of good old words or phrases, research need not exclude harmless slang. Only the other day, for instance, some of us began debating "to have a skinful," meaning a load of booze. One person thought it fairly modern, another voted for Edwardian times, still a third would have traced it as far back as the reign of Queen Victoria herself.

We looked it up in Partridge's epic *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, where you will find the term described as "low colloquialism, 1923."

Though Partridge seldom errs, in this instance I could correct him from my own stock of good-for-nothing lore. Thus:

> "When Methodist preachers come down,
> A preaching that drinking is sinful,
> I'll wager the rascals a crown
> They always preach best with a skinful.'

Those lines are older than the nineteen twenties, older than the preceding Edwardian era, even older than the Victorian age which preceded *that*. They are part of a song sung by one Tony Lumpkin in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, first played at Covent Garden Theatre, London, in March, 1773—years as well as months before the American Declaration of Independence.

If you ask what connection this has with current mysteries, the answer must be that it has none. But it does serve to ease my introduction, as an after-dinner speaker will preface his remarks with some irrelevant anecdote about the two Irishmen. No, stop! Since that might provoke ethnic controversy, make it two Scots; we of Caledonian blood don't mind.

In modest understatement, at least, its publishers call *The Gravy Train*, by Whit Masterson (Dodd, Mead, $4.95), a novel of suspense. Accurately, it's true, they add such praise as "action-packed," "diabolical conspiracy," "race against time and death," "shattering surprise." *I* prefer to call the book a very fine detective novel, with each clue so carefully if misleadingly placed

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the reader may fall slap over it without seeing what's tripped him.

Jake Duffy, F.B.I., must find and stop former U.S.A. Colonel Anthony Heaston, whose escape from a Colombian prison has been engineered by some unknown force so that Heaston may lead a gang of his wartime cutthroats in some unknown crime of supersonic reverberation or effect. Duffy does interpret the evidence, if almost too late; we end the story with a kind of admiring curse. No novel this year should deserve higher praise.

The narrator of *Night Judgement at Sinos*, by Jack Higgins (Doubleday, $4.50), is John Henry Savage, Irish adventurer under many flags, now at salvage work in Mid-Eastern waters aboil with Arab-Israeli conflict as well as other national hatreds too.

Pursuing his shapely Sara, he tries to walk warily between Dimitri Aleko, ruthless Greek millionaire, and Ciasim, the Terrible Turk who remains Savage's friend. After rescuing a prisoner from the island fort at Sinos, he encounters one twist after another until he finds that lost briefcase. Trouble's not over, but we needn't worry; satisfaction guaranteed.

The Poisoners, by Donald Hamilton (Fawcett, 75¢), brings back sardonic Matt Helm, secret agent and executioner, for another paperback-original mission which is also one of the best.

"The poisoners" will be just that, in a most literal sense, if they succeed at what they mean to try. But Matt must cover much ground, from Los Angeles to Mexico and back, before he learns what, how, or by whom. One girl has already been shot. With another girl, cryptic Bobbie, he must survive many explosions, figurative as well as literal, until that last exchange of bullets on the mountain road. Don't miss this particular kind of poisoning—it's a beauty.

For *Ellery Queen's The Golden 13* (World, $6.95) our editor-in-chief has lined up the thirteen first-prize-winning stories in contests held by this magazine; and, despite the drawback of containing a tale by your obedient servant, it may be recommended almost without reserve.

Happily, ten out of thirteen are true detective stories; they play fair. If we see no familiar 'tec face, familiar echoes are everywhere. Manly Wade Wellman's American-Indian hero ("A Star for a Warrior") might have learned sleuthing in Baker Street. Roy Vickers's Chief Inspector Thurtle ("Double Image") could preside over the Department of Dead Ends. Something for everybody here; try it.

This is the 355th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a "slice of life" that reminds us of William F. Nolan's description of the hardboiled style: "bitter, tough, unsentimental, uncompromisingly realistic, reflecting the violence of its time" . . .

The author, John F. Dreyer, was born in Philadelphia in 1937. He was graduated from Kutztown (Pa.) State College in 1960. It was there he met his wife Marie, an art major. After a hitch in the army Mr. Dreyer became a teacher and received his M.A. in English from Villanova University. At the time he wrote "It Just Ain't Right" he was teaching German in a high school in Wilmington, Delaware, where he was also coaching baseball. Among his interests are languages, sports, and the daily wonder of watching the development of his baby daughter, Katie . . .

IT JUST AIN'T RIGHT

by JOHN F. DREYER

"I SEEN A LOT OF murders and it was really one of the best jobs I seen yet. I mean it. Almost perfect. It's really a lot tougher than it looks, you know, to do a *perfect* job. Most people think that all you do is go out, kill somebody, and that's it. There's a lot of people think that way. I read a lot of crime magazines, the *Police Gazette* and all, and almost every month there's a story about some weirdo who thinks all he's got to do is bump somebody off and he's racked up the perfect murder. But it don't work that way. First of all he usually gets caught, and besides there's always something wrong with the way he done it.

"When I first started reading about murders I didn't think nothing about that. At first I was sort of amazed at the guts those guys had because I knew what happened to me when I

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done something bad when I was a kid. I remember how Mom beat me when she found that nickel I took from Tommy Arnold in my pencil case, and when she found out that I tripped Foster Gould on the playground.

"But then I got real interested in murders. You know, like the way they done them and the reasons and all. I began to look for the mistakes the guys made. I got pretty good at it. And then when I got the job on the paper it was really neat. I got to go out and take pictures of the bodies and the weapons and sometimes even the killers. That's where I really got to see that most murderers are either careless or dumb.

"Take that house painter, for example, who killed his boss last year. He put grease on the scaffold they were working on and the boss slipped on it and fell off the scaffold and got killed. It was a pretty good idea except for the grease. He really messed it up with that grease. House painters don't use grease. The cops took one look at that scaffold and they knew something was wrong. A little gob of wet paint in the right place would have done the job.

"And how about the guy—I forget his name—who killed the broad who was blackmailing him? He tried to make it look like suicide. You can't do it. I never seen it work yet. Murder can never look like suicide, especially with all the mistakes that guy made. He put the gun in the wrong hand and left his own prints all over the place. Besides, there was all that blood.

"I was there when they brought him in. Took his picture—got a good shot of him, too. I got a chance to talk to him later. I told him what he done wrong. I heard one of the cops say the dame was hooked on some kind of junk and I told him an overdose would have been his best bet. He said that was a good idea. That made me feel pretty good, coming from a real murderer like that.

"You know, it's funny. Of all the murders I saw when I was working for the paper it was a woman, old Mrs. Bosley, who came closest to the perfect murder. I mean, she did the neatest job. Too bad her chauffeur couldn't stand the heat. I heard he got $10,000 for tampering with her old man's car. Done a first-class job, too. The brakes went at just the right time. That big old limousine really got messed up. A lot of good the old man's money's doing her now. But you just can't trust accomplices. You got to do it yourself. Besides, it don't seem right to have somebody help you.

"Yeah, and I found out there's a lot more to a perfect murder than just getting away with it. Remember that old lady who fell in front of the train in the subway? At least everybody thought she fell. I just snuck up behind her and pushed. She was so old she just sort of collapsed and fell on the tracks just as the train was pulling in. Nobody saw me, so they just figured she fell by accident, being so old and all. That's what they put in the paper. You want to hear something wild? The paper sent *me* down to get a picture of where it happened. They wanted to show how dangerous the subway was because the lady fell and got killed.

"At first I thought I did a good job killing her and I was pretty satisfied with myself. But then I thought about it some more and realized what was wrong. First of all, no one knew it was a murder, so there would never be no chance it would get a write-up in the *Gazette*. Second, all I did was kill somebody. I didn't have no motive. A real murder's got to have a motive.

"I felt kinda bad then. But then I remembered how old she was and useless and how she just collapsed when I pushed her and it didn't bother me no more. The biggest thing was, it sort of broke the ice. It was a little like a warmup, like what a baseball pitcher does before the real game starts.

"So I started to think about who I could kill and have a reason for doing it. It came to me almost at once. There was this ugly hag used to walk around the neighborhood selling combs and pencils and junk like that. I could've killed her just for being so ugly. But that's not a good enough reason. It's got to be robbery or something like that. You just can't kill somebody for being ugly.

"So I decided to kill her and take her money. I knew she had some money because everybody always bought some of the junk off her, probably because they felt sorry for her for being so ugly. I knew right away how I was going to do it. No blood this time. She drank a lot. She was always half drunk. She'd sell a couple of combs and run right down to Nick's and get a shot of the cheapest whiskey she could buy. Then she'd hit the street again, sell a couple more combs and run right back to Nick's.

"So I bought a bottle of good stuff and poured some in an empty bottle I found in the alley. That way they couldn't even trace the bottle. Pretty clever, huh? The poison I bought in a store in Jersey. I picked a fast-acting kind so I wouldn't have to wait too long to rob her. I carried that bottle with me for three days before I found the right time and place. Finally one night I caught her on her way to Nick's. I just handed her the bottle and told her I couldn't finish it. You should've seen her eyes light up.

"She went up the alley and took a couple of quick gulps. I saw her fall. She went down like a balloon when you let the air out of it, just kind of soft and slow. I ran over and reached in the pocket of her ratty old sweater. I got seventy-four cents and a couple of old buttons and junk like that. I took one last look at her. I couldn't see her too good in that dark alley but I remember she was real ugly. She might've had more money on her but I wasn't about to look for it.

"There was just a little piece in the paper about it. They probably didn't even do an autopsy on the poor slob. They just said she was found dead in an alley.

"I still have the money. I threw it in a drawer for a kind of souvenir. Unless Mom took it. She saw it in there one day when she was cleaning and asked where I got it. Man, seventy-four lousy cents and she makes a big deal out of it, a whole Federal case.

"I think you can see what was wrong. It wasn't a real robbery. So it still wasn't a perfect murder. I had to have a real motive, not just one I made up. And ' that wasn't easy thinking up a motive. In fact, I was starting to get worried because I was having trouble thinking one up. I didn't need money. I don't buy much and Mom usually let me keep a couple of dollars out of each pay for myself.

"Then I thought about jealousy. I seen a couple of movies where a jealous guy killed somebody. But I didn't love nobody enough to be jealous. I was happy in my job as a newspaper photographer, especially since I got to take pictures of the murders and all, so I couldn't do it for ambition. It was really weird. I was starting to get depressed. Then all of a sudden it hit me. A real motive. One of the best motives there ever was. Hatred. Plain old hatred. I was so happy and proud of myself. It really seemed like things were starting to fall into place for me. All I had to do now was think of somebody I hated a lot.

"At first I couldn't do it. I mean, I just couldn't think of nobody I hated enough to kill. And I didn't want to make a mistake and kill somebody and find out that it wasn't the right person. You just can't keep killing people until you come to the right one. It just ain't right. Besides, I wasn't out to see how many people I could kill. I ain't no animal. I just wanted to kill one person and do a perfect job.

"I thought of a couple of people and for each one I made it a point to think about that person for a whole day and hate him as much as I could. Like the guy at the gas station who charges me too much when he fixes my car. And the mailman who wrinkles my magazines. Even a couple of teachers who gave me bad marks when I was in school. But it just didn't work. I just couldn't hate any of them enough to kill them.

"I was taking a bath a couple of days later and it came to me. The one person I really hated. And I thought about that person for a whole day. And I kept thinking about all the bad things she done to me and I hated her, really hated her.

"I thought about the time she beat me for getting my feet wet and for stealing that nickel from Tommy Arnold and for tripping that kid on the playground. I thought about her sneaking around my room and throwing out things she found, like some pictures of girls I cut out of my magazines. I thought about her yelling at me all the time for not hanging up my clothes.

"By the end of the day I was ready. In fact, I almost done it that night. She was in bed and I got a knife and I was going to do it. I was ready. But then I thought, 'What kind of a murder is that? Any boob can sneak up on somebody sleeping and stab them.' No sir. I was out to commit the perfect murder, and you sure can't do that with no butcher knife and leave a lot of blood and mess and all.

"I didn't sleep at all that night. Now I had to find the right way to do it. I went through some old copies of the *Gazette* but I couldn't find nothing. Even if I had I don't think I'd have used it. Somehow it just ain't right to use somebody else's plan when you commit a murder. A murder plan is really a personal thing, sort of like your toothbrush. Besides, most of those guys got caught.

"She woke up while I was looking through the magazines and yelled for me to turn the light off and go to bed. I cursed her but not loud enough for her to hear.

"The plan was pretty neat if I say so myself. I had some of the poison left over from the job on the old hag. Just a little of that in her coffee and it would be all over. Then I'd roll her down the cellar steps and it would look like an accident. I done it in the morning before I went to work and was out shooting pictures till the middle of the afternoon.

"Then I went home and called the hospital and gave them my name and address and told them to send an ambulance for my mother, but that I thought she was dead. The guy on the phone didn't sound quite right but he said he'd send an ambulance right over.

"When I checked the cellar she wasn't there. A couple of minutes later the police came. I didn't really find out exactly what happened until later. I forgot that her and her sister, my Aunt Violet, go to the movies every Wednesday. Aunt Violet came round at two o'clock and she found Mom dead and she was at the hospital when I called. Everybody thought it was an accident until I called and asked them to send an ambulance.

"I keep telling the guys here that, except for that one bad break, I committed the perfect murder. They won't listen much any more. They all tell me they thought the same thing. But you should hear some of them stories. Some of those guys are really dumb. You can pick out their mistakes a mile away."

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 356th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. It is also the first "first story" of its kind to appear in EQMM.

The author, John O'Brien, was 41 when he wrote "Ludwig Soaring Down." He has four children and has taught English and speech at Malden High School for the past twelve years. His only previous publications have been nonfiction—two essays on temporal and religious aspects of teaching and one essay on racial integration in the theater. Mr. O'Brien's academic credentials are most impressive: two degrees from Tufts—A.B., magna cum laude, and Ed.M. (1961). He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1951. He has also studied at Boston University, Seton Hall, Syracuse, Simmons, Suffolk, and Boston College. But surely two of the most interesting statistics about Mr. O'Brien are the following: he has finished the Boston Marathon four times (his best clocking was 3:53), and in 1968 he attended the Democratic National Convention as an elected alternate delegate.

And now we offer you an "experience" . . . .

Ludwig Soaring Down

by JOHN O'BRIEN

THE EXACT TIME IS 5:59 A.M. I AM RECORDING IT precisely because I took a pill at 5:30, and ever since I have been sitting here waiting for it to take effect. Since I can feel something starting to happen, I am noting the time. That way, when I come out of it, I'll know how long I tripped.

It'll be my first time, really, because I don't count occasional marijuana cigarettes. They make me dreamy, sort of tired in a loose way. If you've never smoked pot it's a little bit like sipping wine and hearing banjos while viewing a sunset from the

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top of a Ferris wheel. A little bit. But just as there's no substitute for experience, there's no substitute for marijuana. To convey the sensation is like trying to explain sex to a virgin.

I can smell strawberry incense burning. Candles flicker on my bookcase. Music in my brain, not rock, not tonight. Beethoven's Eroica Symphony. Nothing but the best. Like my life. Best father and mother, best brothers and sisters. Best friends. Autumn night. Best season. Pure night air. Not virginal pure, but everything is relative. Books: pure thoughts. Music: pure tones. Pure friendship. Moments seconds minutes are gifts. Thanks for the gifts. Not thank you. That implies a you. Just thanks.

I'm lying on my rug. Green cloth. Cotton. People would call it a cheap rug. Funny. Also sad. Also and *all so sad. Precious rug. Beyond price. Not all the diamonds of Timbuktu could buy this rug. Green. Soft. Home. Home in my rug. Strawberry nostrils. Green rug and strawberry nostrils. Green strawberry music. Music nostrils. Strawberry ears. Green taste. Green beautiful. Rainbow wall. Rainbow hands. Rub: red legs, purple belly, orange shoulders. Rainbow rubdown. Rainbow rubdown on rug.*

Rest. Relax. Time is mine. Time is dead. I killed time. Goodbye, time. Hello, me. Hi. I'm me. I'm green and orange and purple and red and yellow. Yellow feet. I'm a rainbow, a green strawberry rainbow. Hello, Ludwig. Wish you were here. You are here. Your music is here. You must be here. I hear you, but I can't see you. You live while your music lives. I live while the rainbow lives. You need me, Ludwig. With no one to hear you, you're dead. I don't need you. I can listen to someone else. Does the rainbow hear you? Does your music see the rainbow?

I know what I'll do. I'll wrap the rainbow and the strawberry and Ludwig's music in the green rug. Then we'll all roll. Roll out the rainbow and we'll have a rug full of strawberry. How's that, Ludwig? You can use that to finish your unfinished symphony.

Hey, that's me, an unfinished symphony. An unstarted symphony. The orchestra is still tuning up their instruments. That's why my life lacks harmony. I need time. But time is dead. I killed time. Only color lives, and sound and smell—and taste and touch. How's that? I remember all five. I pass the test.

Now is all that ever was or ever will be. Now is God. Hello, *God, meet Ludwig. Ludwig, meet God. Play something for God, Ludwig. Play a little tune for the Grand Old Man. You keep popping up, telling us to try the old way again, when everyone but you knows you're dead.*

Time is dead. Goodbye, time. God is dead. Goodbye, God. Ludwig is dead when his music stops. Goodbye, Ludwig. I'm alive, born to smile at rainbows.

Ludwig, stop that ringing. It's ruining your symphony. I don't remember a bell. It's awful. It's breaking my brain. Please stop stop stop st

"I know questioning is difficult for you, but I must ask: do you know the time of your child's death?"

"Yes. I know the exact time."

"How can that be?"

"I—I heard a thud. It must have been the body hitting the floor. As I was running upstairs, my alarm clock rang."

"What time was it set for?"

"The same as always—six a.m."

a *NEW* crime story by

BERKELY MATHER

first publication in the United States

The saga of Jimmy Turrell beginning immediately after Dunkirk and culminating in a £500,000 treasure hunt—"probably worth much more now, with prices soaring the way they've been")...

TREASURE TROVE

by BERKELY MATHER

ALL JIMMY TURRELL possessed when he landed at Dover was a pair of pants, a flannel shirt, and a firm resolve to go no more a-soldiering. His sartorial deficiencies were made up for at the temporary quartermaster's store on the dockside where some nice ladies at the W.V.S. canteen gave him tea, soup, cigarettes, and kind words, and a harassed R. T. O.'s staff shoved a railway ticket, a ten-shilling note, and a buff form at him with a request to keep moving as there were a thousand blokes in similar plight in front of him and Gawd knew how many behind.

The buff form was in place of his A.B. 64, the sole identity document a British soldier carries on active service, which was now a pulpy mass somewhere in the English Channel, and it was made out to Private B. Kemp, No. 51832986, of the Royal Army Service Corps. Kemp was the name of Jimmy's platoon leader—the R.A.S.C. was a very large body of men indeed—and the number he filled in was the first unthinking routine that came into his head.

All in all, Jimmy Turrell—now B. Kemp—considered he had enough on him now to blind any bloody military policeman who was ever pupped, and in those frenetic days immediately after Dunkirk

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his confidence was no doubt fully justified.

He made his way to the home of his married sister in the East End, but his brother-in-law said not flaming likely; he was on the lam from the Grenadiers himself, and anyhow young Jimmy had a record—only two appearances in the Juvenile Court, admittedly, but that meant he was on the books and, family loyalty notwithstanding, he'd rather he kept going. He did fix him up with civilian clothes, however, and a few words of advice, while his sister wept on his shoulder and slipped her weekly pay envelope from the aircraft factory into his side pocket.

The contents of the envelope got him a room in a large house in a rundown square between Paddington Station and Bayswater, and the advice took him to Soho where he sat for some six hours each day in a corner of Nicky Laurantus' pie and beanery until he was contacted by Jellyboy Simpson's talent scout, as his brother-in-law had forecast and no doubt arranged. What with conscription and youngsters precociously branching out on their own in the black market, likely lads to devil for the barons in really big jobs were getting a bit thin on the ground in those days.

And Jellyboy *was* a baron—the biggest and best safecracker of the lot—and what he was laying on at this moment was very big potatoes indeed. Half a million pounds worth of hot diamonds had come out of one end of Antwerp just as the Germans entered the other, and they were now in the strong room of a certain Hatton Garden dealer.

It was a beautifully cased job. A fixer rented a shop three doors along from the diamond merchant's place and Jellyboy moved in with four of his blokes—two bricklayers, a plumber, and an electrician—and they tunneled for nearly six weeks before coming up through two feet of concrete into the basement strongroom where the safe was.

Jimmy was the lookout, fronting by day as an office boy busily going from one building to another with a bunch of letters and papers in his hand, and at night as a firewatcher up on the roof. They had a bellpush hidden in the entrance of an office building and it was his job to press it if the dull thudding down under the foundations ever got too audible. Also, from time to time, he used to lower bottles of water, food, cigarettes, and other necessaries through a ventilation shaft.

There was nothing difficult

about any of this in the blackout. He just had to keep his wits about him, his eyes open, and his mouth well buttoned.

And he did all that in a manner that earned Jellyboy's warmest praise—right up to the night when after twenty-four hours of superhuman toil they made their final breakthrough into the safe itself. It was inconsiderate of Herr Goering to open the Blitz on London on that same September night.

They dug Jellyboy and his four teammates out from under the rubble the next day, in a routine salvage operation—more or less unhurt. Two of them managed to scarper in the confusion, but Jellyboy himself and the remaining two weren't quick enough, and they were done bang to rights with a blown safe and a thousand pounds' worth of highly illegal equipment in the strongroom.

But not the diamonds. They had come up the ventilator in a canvas bag at the end of a rope when Jellyboy realized that they were trapped. They came up with his almost tearful exhortations to Jimmy to remember that he was a good boy—and to act like one—that God's eye would be on him the whole time until he, Jellyboy, was in a position to take over again, at which juncture if he, Jimmy, had got any wicked ideas about this bag of ice, he, Jellyboy, would personally slit his flickering fuel pipe from navel to eyebrows, so help him.

Jimmy said, "What, *me?*" in an injured tone. "Caw! What do you think I am?" And he took off through the smoking ruins to the comparative safety of the West End. Jellyboy subsequently was sentenced to seven years, while the other two, with not quite such impressive records, drew five and three respectively.

Jellyboy's instructions to Jimmy had been to hand the bag over to a lady named Sandra, who lived just off the King's Road, and these had been repeated, bloodthirstily, by the two quickthinkers who had made their escape, when they had cornered him in Nicky Laurantus' some days later. Jimmy managed to give them the slip, but it frightened him badly—so badly that he crept through the blackout to the house of his sister and brother-in-law, for more advice.

The advice was immediately forthcoming, together with a strong admonition from his brother-in-law. "You're too young for them sort of larks," he said sternly. "Every fence in the business is on the lookout for that stuff."

"Tell me the name of a good

one," Jimmy begged, and his brother-in-law laughed scornfully.

"How far do you think you'd get?" he asked. "A green kid walking in with a bagful of ice that big? They'd have it off you and you'd be out on your ear in five seconds flat—and you'd still have Jellyboy, or some of his mates, to reckon with."

"What'll I do with it then?" Jimmy quavered.

" 'And it over to me," was the immediate response. "I'll see it's placed proper and you don't get robbed."

"I may be a kid but I'm not *that* green," Jimmy told him, and left quickly in a storm of outraged expletives.

But he was still frightened, the more so when he realized that the outer fringe of the underworld in which he now moved was talking of the brash youngster by the name of Kemp who had come the acid over the great and terrible Jellyboy—and there was even mention of a sweepstake being run by a Dean Street bookie on how many days Jimmy could run before being fished out of the Thames one foggy morning.

So he stayed close to his room for the next few days, but he was behind with the rent now and the meager expense money he had got from Jellyboy was coming to an end. He even toyed with the idea of taking the bag to Sandra, but he put that firmly behind him as pusillanimous, and finally bought a trowel and a paper-hanger's knife from a Do-It-Yourself shop and pinched a little cement from some bomb-damage works across the square.

Then he carefully prised away the stained wallpaper in an alcove by the fireplace in his room, removed five bricks, stowed the bag in the cavity behind them, and made a very neat reparation job of it afterward.

That took care of the half million pounds worth of diamonds. Nobody knew his hideout; some feral instinct had made him keep that dark even from his sister, let alone from his Soho acquaintances.

He hitchhiked to Sheffield then and was soon doing quite nicely retailing near-nylon stockings round the pubs for a black market wholesaler; but his luck ran out one night when he tried to flog a pair to a large and solemn man in a stained raincoat who heard his spiel right through and then said, "Where did you get 'em? Where's your hawker's license? Comes to that, where's your ration book and identity card? What's a young bloke like you doing out of uniform? And I think you'd better take a little walk along with me"—all in one long flat Midland monotone.

He tried the lost memory-and-shellshock act at his court-martial and was lucky in that a fairly easy Command Psychiatrist shrugged and said, "Could be. Lot of it about," or words to that effect. So he got away with two years in the Glasshouse, which was reviewed after six months, as was the custom then, and he was reposted to another infantry unit, landing some months later in Bombay where he managed to keep his nose clean and turn a dishonest rupee or two in the Transit Camp for the duration.

He was demobbed in 1946 and returned to London. The first place he made for was the square north of Bayswater, and there he got a nasty shock. They'd had a doodlebug on it, and half the terrace where he'd sojourned was a powdered heap of rubble.

But then, with heart-stopping relief, he saw that the damage had missed Number 12 by three houses, although none of them had come through it scathless. Imitation stone cornices had been ripped off and many of the windows were blanked out with corrugated iron.

He went up the steps. Children were playing about and there were five perambulators in the hall. There were four variegated bellpushes on the warped door lintel, some with names illegibly scrawled on dirty bits of card beside them, and from that he assumed that the place had been subdivided into four flats. His room had been the second floor back, so he pressed the bell that he thought would correspond with that level. It had *Mulvaney* beside it. Nothing happened and a small girl informed him that none of the bells worked any'ow. So he went up.

The door to "his" room now appeared to be the entrance to the flat. He arranged his features into something between a courteous smile and an expression of authority not to be trifled with and tapped on the panel. After a few minutes a large man in a grubby undershirt opened up.

"Mr. Mulvaney?"

"And what if it is now?"

"Do you mind if I come in for a moment?" Round the hump of the big man's shoulder he could see the alcove quite plainly. A rickety chest of drawers stood in it now, but the ghastly rose-and-turnip-patterned wallpaper seemed to be the same, although with a considerably deeper patina of grime.

"And what is it you'd be wanting in here?" the large man asked. "Are yez from the Welfare or young Sean's probation?"

Jimmy, who had been expecting to see a woman at this hour of the day, could come up with nothing better than that he had a nice line in nylons he would be bringing around—and two and a half turbulent minutes later he was picking himself up from the gutter in front of the house amid shrill applause from the children. A sympathetic postman brushed him down and led him away.

"Taking yer life in yer 'ands going into that dump, mate," he said. "Took over by the Council for homeless families, and a right bloody jungle it is. Not a one of 'em's paid a sausage rent in the last two years, because nobody's got the guts to go and collect it—and I don't blame 'em."

He went down to his married sister's torn by conflicting emotions—relief that the stuff was still pretty certain to be there, but wondering how the hell he was going to get at it. The boisterous welcome he received in the bosom of his family heartened him a little. His sister immediately set about cooking Spam in powdered egg, while his brother-in-law slipped out to buy a couple of bottles of beer.

The two quickthinkers arrived while he was in the middle of his supper—with razors at the ready—and his brother-in-law, who had telephoned for them, locked his screaming sister in the closet under the stairs. Jimmy upended the supper table on them and departed through the kitchen window, taking the frame and glass with him, and didn't stop running until he had outstripped them by a good half mile.

He went to Birmingham this time, and stayed there for ten years, prospering greatly from the proceeds of various rackets that ranged from clothing coupons to used cars and culminating in the sweetest tickle of them all—scrap metal. He used to venture down to London on an average of once a month behind a large mustache, sunglasses, and the wheel of his current car, and at night he would go and gaze longingly at Number 12. It was still in Council occupation—with the same number of flats but far more denizens, among whom Mr. Mulvaney appeared conspicuously.

Yes, he prospered all right, but in all that time he never knew a single untroubled night's sleep. That bag behind the brickwork needled the silk pajamas off him and turned the smoked salmon, black market steaks, and champagne to dust and hydrochloric acid in his very mouth.

And then, at last, his break came. Number 12 and its four adjacent houses were derequisitioned and the tenants rehoused at the other end of Paddington—and great was the scramble when the rat-infested derelict houses were thrown on the open market. Every developer in the business seemed to be represented at the auction—including Jimmy, who retained a pretty downy man-of-affairs to bid for him, while he watched from the sidelines, having taken the precaution of adding a beard to the big mustache and dyeing the lot, together with his sandy hair, a midnight black.

It went as one lot—the five houses and the big hole at the end where the doodlebug had actually struck. Jimmy had been round in the early morning of the day of the sale in the hope that he might be able to slip in when Mr. Mulvaney and his brood moved out, but a horde of would-be squatters were waiting to pounce, and the police were there in force.

Ah, well, he thought philosophically, he was well armed. £61,000—everything he had in the world, his total assets. £30,000 ought to do it, his man-of-affairs had told him. A nice little parcel of land that—worth hanging onto for a couple or three years until this area really started to move up, then either put up a block of luxury flats himself, or get rid of it to one of the new combines when the property had appreciated another ten or twenty thousand.

Some fifty sharp-eyed gentlemen stood in front of the rostrum, and the bidding opened at ten thousand and went up in tantalizingly slow fives, signaled by winks, earpullings, and nosescratching with catalogues. Jimmy's man signaled by seemingly nervous twitches of his tie. It stuck for a while at twenty-five, and the hammer was just coming down for Jimmy when the only woman present, a shriveled little thing in a tatty near-mink, jiggled an earring, and away it went in a quick run to thirty-five—forty—forty-five—fifty—and by now Jimmy was sweating, and his mouth was dry.

His man-of-affairs looked up at him questioningly, and Jimmy nodded—so up it went to fifty-five thousand. Damn them, thought Jimmy. Does somebody know? Has somebody guessed? But he fought his doubts down—and up went the bidding to sixty. Everybody had dropped out now except the woman and a mousy little man at the back of the crowd, and eventually Jimmy got it at £65,000—four thousand over his limit—but he wasn't worrying about that. The bank would carry him for the difference—and he'd get a lot of it back in time if he hung onto it—and there was *half a million* hidden behind those bricks—probably worth much more now, with prices soaring the way they've been.

His man-of-affairs joined him as he was making out the check. He said, as he mopped his brow, "There's a lot of newspaper boys hanging around. They want to know who the principal is—and why."

"Get rid of them," Jimmy told him tersely. "If this leaks out I'm holding you responsible—personally. Thirty thousand! You ought to start doing some homework!"

The man-of-affairs moaned. "Those two were phonies. I was trying to tell you! They were put up by the Squatters' League just to monkey up the sale. They hadn't a feather between them. Thirty thousand pounds *is* the value—like I told you—unless you want to wait twenty years to make up the difference."

" 'If you can wait—and not be tired by waiting,' " quoted Jimmy, who knew his Rudyard Kipling.

His receipt took him past the police without question, and the icepick and trowel he carried in his overcoat pocket made short shrift of the brickwork.

But there was no bag there—and he was gibbering and weeping when the solemn young constable on duty at the front door came up and found him.

"Blimey, sir," the constable said in mild surprise. "You're not diamond mining by any chance, are you?"

"What do you mean by that?" Jimmy demanded, glaring at him wild-eyed.

"Well, you're digging in the same spot as they found a bloody big bag of sparklers in 1945, when they demolished Number Twelve."

"This *is* Number Twelve!" screamed Jimmy.

"*Was*," the constable corrected him. "They renumbered the houses when the end of the square got blitzed. This is the old Number Ten. You wouldn't mind stepping along to the station with me, sir, would you? These houses has always interested Mr. Stanton, our Divisional Detective Inspector."

They weren't able to connect him with anything, but Jellyboy Simpson, long out of durance vile and now a lay preacher with the Primitive Methodists in Camberwell, started to get interested again—so once more Jimmy left town, the day after the Council slapped a compulsory purchase order on his property for £11,000. This he lost in disastrous betting ventures within three months.

But he's got a good steady job now, with a pension at the end of it if he keeps his nose clean for another fifteen and a half years.

He's a traffic warden in Wolverhampton.

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an "inverted detective story" by

PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

Claude Merrivale, a fading actor, his professional career mostly behind him, had his future to worry about. And it might be a long future—without work, without money, without hope. He could see only one course of action—a desperate course, but he was certain he could bring it off. All he had to do was plan and execute a perfect murder . . .

YOU CAN'T DEPEND ON ANYBODY

by PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

BY FRIDAY AFTERNOON Claude knew how he would do it.

Ralph Carpenter was coming to see Lola at 3:00 on Sunday, and he'd be gone by 4:00—definitely gone, because he had a train to catch at 4:30, Lola had said. Claude would go to Lola's at about 4:10, kill her with the cat statue or anything else heavy that presented itself, leave the apartment, and Lola's maid would arrive at 5:00 and find the body. Ralph's fingerprints would be everywhere—on the glasses or cups, on the bottles, on Lola's cigarette lighter. Ralph was the restless type who walked around touching everything. The only thing Claude intended to wipe clean was the cat statue, which would be exactly what a scatterbrained young man like Ralph would do—wipe the weapon and leave his prints on everything else.

The cold that Lola had complained about to Claude on Thursday evening at the theater had become worse the next morning, and Lola had said she was going to stay in all weekend and not see anybody except Ralph who was to pop in around 3:00 on Sunday. It had suddenly come to Claude—like one of those intuitive flashes that used to come to him after hours of futile pondering to solve some problem in his acting—that Ralph Carpenter was exactly the person to pin the murder on.

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Even the motive was there: Ralph was going to be cut off from Lola Parsons' financial support. And the reason for that? Claude would say that Lola had decided to try to make a go of it again with her estranged husband, Claude, and he had convinced her that it was high time Ralph Carpenter learned to stand on his own feet.

For two years Claude had been trying to stop Lola from encouraging Ralph as an actor, stop her from giving him $300 or $400 every month or so. All their friends knew that. Their friends considered Ralph the main reason for Claude's and Lola's separation, blaming it on Claude's jealousy. But that wasn't so. Why should he be jealous of a 24-year-old weakling with a pretty face, who had not distinguished himself in anything since he had started his "career" at 21? When he, Claude Merrivale, at 19, had given a performance as Hamlet in Philadelphia that had brought rave reviews from the leading critics in New York? And as for any *romance* between Ralph and Lola—that was absurd! Lola was 20 years older than Ralph. She was merely toying with him; she liked him to dance attendance on her, and Ralph played up to her. That was all there was to it.

On Friday afternoon Claude picked up the telephone and called the McLains. Liz and Ed McLain were old friends of his and Lola's, and they lived near Lola in Greenwich Village.

"Claude! Where've you been hiding?" Liz asked.

"Oh, I've been seeing Lola a bit lately."

"I'm glad to hear that. I wouldn't be surprised if you two got back together again. Ed's betting you will."

"Well, there's a possibility," Claude said in a cheerful tone. "I was wondering if I could drop in for a little while Sunday afternoon—say, around three?"

"I know we'll be up, anyway. Ed's up around noon and I'm one of the unemployed now, so there's no excuse for me sleeping all day. Love to see you, Claude."

"How's Ed? Still plugging along in 'Whistle'?"

"What do you mean plugging along? Jimmy's going to go to college on what Ed's made in 'Whistle'."

Claude reproached himself mildly, after he had hung up, for having said "plugging along," because Ed had the lead in "The Silver Whistle." His remark had sounded jealous, and it reminded Claude of something Lola had said at the theater on Thursday evening. There had been a man of 50 in the play, with graying hair, whose acting Claude really hadn't liked, and he had said so to Lola. Then Lola, in her laughing tone that let her get away with murder sometimes, had remarked, "That's the trouble with going to the theater with you. You see somebody whose part you think *you* could be playing, and you promptly don't like him and don't like the whole play." ("I didn't say I didn't like the whole play," Claude had protested, but Lola had not been listening to him, and the damage had been done.)

It was partly true, Claude had to admit. He was sour about his lack of work. Ever since he'd had that car accident four years ago, which had left him with a limp, his luck had turned bad. Everybody said how distinguished a limp would make him look on the stage, and he couldn't honestly blame the limp for his lack of work, but he dated his bad luck from the time of the mishap.

And the quarreling with Lola had begun around that time, too. His lack of work made him nervous, and Lola hadn't been able to understand that. How could she, since she'd never had to worry one day of her life about money? She'd been glamorous, blonde-and-blue-eyed Lola Parsons from 20 to 39, and when her beauty had begun to fade she just quit the stage and began living on her independent income. She'd never know what it was to watch your looks fading with time and your roles and reputation dwindling at the same rate.

Finally, two years ago, she had told him that he was "so sour on the world" that he didn't deserve a job, and so disagreeable to live with that she didn't care to live with him any longer. Claude had left their apartment in the Village and had taken a small place of his own in the East Twenties. His life hadn't been easy for these past two years. Lola had offered him money occasionally, but he'd been too proud to take it—except once or twice, perhaps. He'd had only two small parts in all that time, and he had pawned every piece of jewelry he owned. Claude had been promised work by several people, but somehow it never materialized. He had come to believe that you couldn't depend on anybody.

A few months ago Claude had felt he couldn't stand his semipoverty any longer—not with watching Ralph Carpenter unblushingly taking money from Lola—and he had asked Lola if he could come back to her; but she had said no. "We can still be friends and see each other now and then, can't we?"

he had asked. "Of course, Claude," Lola had said. "You're the one who always wants to cut things completely off."

So he had begun to see her once a week or so, just to get a general idea of the way she lived now, because he had decided to kill her if he could think of a perfectly safe way to do it. Years ago Lola had made her will, leaving all her money to him, and he was sure she hadn't changed it in the last two years. She wasn't that practical a woman. He remembered, five or six years ago, what a difficult time he'd had to get her to make a will at all. Details bored her. And besides, he had asked her sarcastically in one of their arguments, just before he moved out of the house, if she was going to change her will, and she had answered indifferently, "Of course not. I wouldn't bother."

He had learned that she still saw the same old friends, that there were no men friends who might be called romantic interests, that she still kept late hours and often entertained theater people after midnight, and that she had a young French maid named Colette who came at 5:00 p.m. every day except Monday.

One thing Claude was sure of about Lola: she didn't discuss heir private affairs with her friends. Therefore, when he told the McLains and Joyce Gilmore (when he phoned her on Saturday) and perhaps a few other people that he and Lola were going to live together again, people would believe him.

Claude called Joyce Gilmore on Saturday afternoon and asked if he could come by around 4:30 on Sunday, because he was going to be in her neighborhood. Joyce said, "Of course, Claude!" just as he knew she would. Joyce was 22, stage-struck, ambitious, and blessed with a modest allowance from home. As a child Joyce had heard of Lola Parsons and Claude Merrivale, and to know them both personally, to be able to call them by their first names, was a glamorous experience for her. So now Claude had two dates for Sunday—one before and one after the murder.

Claude got to the McLains' a little after 3:00 on Sunday, at just the time Ralph should have been arriving at Lola's. The McLains gave him iced coffee and crumbcake—they had remembered he was especially fond of crumbcake.

"What's this I hear about you and Lola?" Ed asked. "Are you really patching things up?"

Claude smiled and pulled his fingertips down the bridge of his nose, an old stage trick of his when he wished to appear shy or embarrassed. "As I said to Liz, it's a possibility. A little more than that, I think."

"I'm delighted, Claude," Ed said heartily. "What a shame she isn't here today!"

"She's down with a bad cold, you know," Claude said. "Also she's seeing Ralph Carpenter this afternoon. I think Lola wants to have a talk with him."

"Oh, yes, her protégé. What's he doing lately?" Ed asked.

"Nothing much, I gather. He says he's off to Massachusetts for a job in summer stock." Claude's tone made the job sound highly dubious. "I think I've convinced Lola that she's backing the wrong horse, and she's going to break the news to him this afternoon that he's not getting any more—umm—backing. I hope it doesn't hit him too hard."

"Has she really been *financing* him?" Liz asked.

"Oh—giving him three or four thousand a year, I suppose. Not that I don't believe in helping a struggling young actor, but *this* one— He doesn't plod the streets looking for work. I told Lola that if I was going to be the man of the house again, this kind of thing has to stop."

Just before 4:00 Claude stood up to leave. The McLains pressed him to stay.

"No, I promised Joyce Gilmore I'd look in on her. And I want to go by Eighth Street and pick up some of my favorite pipe tobacco."

Claude went down the two flights of stairs and out the door into Charles Street. 3:57. Lola's apartment was only a few blocks from here, and Joyce's four blocks from Lola's. Claude walked at a leisurely pace toward Lola's apartment on Grove Street, taking a way that Ralph would probably not be taking, if he were in search of a taxi or on his way to the Christopher Street subway station. Claude walked along the west side of Bleecker Street, and as he came within a few yards of where Grove Street crossed Bleecker he saw Ralph trotting along on the other side of Grove Street in the direction of Seventh Avenue, his head down, a seersucker jacket slung over one shoulder. He was late. Claude hoped he'd make his train, otherwise he might come back to Lola's.

Claude rang Lola's bell. She pressed the buzzer immediately. Claude climbed the stairs. Lola lived at the top.

"Ralph?" she called down. "Forget something?"

"No, it's me. Mind if I come up?"

"Claude?" She leaned over the stairwell. "Well, this is a surprise! Happy Sunday!" She'd used to say "Happy Sunday!" every Sunday morning at breakfast when they had lived together.

"Hot Sunday," Claude remarked, looking her up and down as he reached the hall level. She was wearing her pink taffeta dressing gown, its full sleeves held tight at the wrists by the pair of flat silver bracelets he had given her on one of her birthdays. Her hair was a great golden puff around her bright blue-eyed face.

"Ralph just left," she said. "We've been out on the terrace trying to catch a breeze. Want to go out? It's cooler there."

"No, not particularly," he said, though the little terrace, he remembered, was secluded and Lola often took nude sunbaths there in the summer. Claude looked at the alabaster cat statue on the mantel, then at the terrace where on the little table in front of the glider stood a Dubonnet bottle and a soda bottle, two glasses, the ice bucket, and Lola's silver table lighter that Ralph surely would have touched.

"What's the matter?" Lola asked. "You look stiff as a poker. What happened?"

"Nothing," Claude said, moving restlessly out on the terrace. His eyes alighted on a weatherbeaten croquet mallet, which would be better than the cat statue, assuming that the quarrel might have started on the terrace. Claude picked up the mallet absently. Lola was still in the living room. He approached Lola with the mallet handle in his right hand, the head of the mallet in his left. "How's Ralph?" he asked her.

"Wonderful." Lola smiled her happy smile. "Very hopeful about his summer job. He's—"

Claude brought the mallet down above her horrified eyes, squarely on her forehead, and struck another blow on the top of her head as she fell. Her forehead began to bleed. Claude wiped the croquet mallet thoroughly with his handkerchief and dropped the mallet outside on the terrace. He felt for Lola's pulse, first in her wrist, then in her neck. He could not feel any. He felt sickened suddenly, and if he had had to hit her again, he could not have.

He glanced quickly around the room, though he was too nervous to see anything except Lola's familiar untidiness before a maid was due to arrive. He wiped his forehead with the handkerchief, made sure there was nobody on the stairs, then went down. He wiped the brass knobs of the front doors also, and her bell which he had pressed.

He took off his jacket as he walked toward Joyce Gilmore's, trying to combine haste—because it was now 4:16—with cooling and calming himself before he got there.

Joyce greeted him enthusiastically. "Oh, Claude, it's so nice to *see* you! I've got news! I might get a job as prop girl in Kennebunkport if the girl who's got the job now gets married, and I think she's going to. What do you think of that?"

Claude expressed appropriate congratulations, then said, "And what do you think of my news? That Lola and I are going to try it again?"

"Well, I'm pleased! Happy! I say congratulations to both of you!"

"Thanks," Claude said. He knew Joyce liked Lola immensely, because Lola had given her a lot of her time, coaching her, showing her how to use her voice.

Joyce made iced coffee for him, too. Claude looked at his watch. It was now almost 5:00, when Lola's maid Colette would arrive. He stayed at Joyce's until a little after 5:00, while she talked about job prospects for the autumn, and then he left.

Claude went to a tobacco shop on Eighth Street and bought his special brand that he had mentioned to the McLains, so he could produce it if he were asked. Then he made his way back to his apartment. He expected a telephone call at once, but by a little after 6:00 the telephone had still not rung.

The telephone was silent all evening.

It would be in *The Times* tomorrow morning, he was sure. Colette or the police just hadn't thought him close enough to Lola to phone him at once. Or maybe the police were already off in pursuit of Ralph Carpenter? Ralph's name would have been in Lola's appointment book. She always wrote down her appointments.

But it wasn't in *The Times* the next morning, Monday. Claude couldn't understand it. It was impossible that the police would hush up the murder of someone so well-known as Lola Parsons. Hadn't Colette arrived yesterday? She worked for Lola on Sundays. Monday was her day off.

Claude remembered that Colette's last name was something like Duchout or Duchesne, and that she lived on the west side. He found a Jeanne Duchesne in the West Eighties—perhaps her mother or her sister—and dialed the number. He had guessed well. A woman with a French accent answered the telephone, and then Colette came on.

"Hello, Colette. This is Claude Merrivale," Claude said. "I was wondering if you could come to Madame Lola today, even though it is your day off, because she is not feeling well. She has a bad cold. In fact, I'm worried because her phone doesn't answer, and she really shouldn't go out in her condition."

"Ah, m'sieur, I am so sorry. I told Madame on Sunday morning that I could not come Monday because I am *malade* with the same cold, I think. Today I am really worse. It is *la grippe*. But tomorrow Tuesday I come. Today I must stay in because the doctor is coming this afternoon to look at me." She paused to blow her nose. "Perhaps she has gone to stay with a friend, because I cannot come, m'sieur. Perhaps she is with her cousin."

"That's an idea," Claude said. "I'll try her cousin. But you'll surely be there tomorrow?"

"Ah, oui, m'sieur!"

Claude hung up, thwarted. Tomorrow then. The fingerprints would still be there.

He suddenly remembered that Joyce Gilmore had said she was going to Lola's at noon on Tuesday for a diction lesson. Splendid! Lola wouldn't answer the doorbell, and then Joyce would ring up the McLains, probably, to see if Lola were with them, and then phone him. She was that kind of girl: she took her diction lessons seriously. He'd tell Joyce that he was also worried because Lola hadn't answered her telephone, and didn't she think they should get the superintendent to open the apartment?

Claude went to bed at midnight, and spent a second restless night.

There was nothing in *The Times* about Lola on Tuesday morning. Claude had hoped that Lola might have had an appointment with someone on Monday, someone persistent enough to find out where she was, even to demand that her door be opened. He supposed that would have been too much to expect. At any rate, it hadn't happened.

Noon Tuesday. No telephone call from Joyce. Then at 1:15 his telephone rang. It was Colette. Claude had hopes.

"'Ello, M'sieur Merrivale. I call to tell you that I cannot come today after all. The doctor says I have really some flu, and that I must stay in bed until Thursday. I tell you, because I cannot reach Madame. She does not answer."

Claude wanted to curse. You

couldn't depend on *anybody!* "All right, Colette," he said unsympathetically. "I'll tell her."

"I will surely be there on Thursday, m'sieur."

Claude rang up Joyce Gilmore. Joyce was in. Claude spoke to her as if he hadn't remembered that she was to see Lola today at noon. He had a pretext for calling her, an expensive one: would she like to see "One Fine Day" with him on Thursday night? He wouldn't have to buy the tickets, he thought, because Lola's body would have been found by then.

"I'd love to go, Claude! It's not a very good play, though, is it?"

"No, but there's not much choice this time of year. Uh—weren't you supposed to see Lola today? How is she?"

"Oh! She wasn't home. I went over at twelve. You know the way she is. She doesn't always remember, even when she's written something down."

"I haven't been able to reach her since—since Sunday morning, I think. Her telephone doesn't answer. Frankly, I'm a little worried."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry. She probably made a lunch date and forgot all about her date with me. I'll call her back around three or four."

"Seriously, Joyce, I'm thinking of getting the superintendent to open the apartment. Would you come over to Lola's with me, if I picked you up?"

"I've got a date in forty-five minutes for this Kennebunkport job, Claude. I wouldn't worry, because if she's well enough to go out, she *must* be all right. Got to go and dress now. Call me before Thursday and we'll set a time. Or I'll call you. Thanks a million, Claude. Bye-bye." She hung up.

He'd have to get the super and barge in, Claude supposed. But he dreaded facing it. It would be much easier to send someone else, like the McLains. He decided to ring the McLains, as well as Lola's cousin, before he phoned the super. It would look better.

He dialed the McLains' number. They didn't answer.

Then he called Lola's cousin, Mrs. Alice Haney, who lived near Gramercy Park. After the preliminary "How are you?" and "It's been so long," which Claude felt were rather cool on her part, he asked if Lola were there.

"No, she isn't."

"She doesn't answer her telephone and I don't know where she is," Claude said. "She's been sick, you know, down with a bad cold. I'm getting worried."

"She probably went off to stay with a friend for a couple of days. Nobody likes to be alone when they're sick."

"But I was wondering if something could've happened to her in the apartment? I thought it might be a good idea to open her door. I wonder if you'll come over with me now and I'll speak to the superintendent, because I haven't a key."

"I just washed my hair, so I can't go out for a couple of hours, Claude. I wouldn't be anxious if I were you."

"But I've *called* a few of her friends," Claude said desperately.

"Well, I'll leave it up to you about opening the apartment. You probably know best. If you really feel that anxious—"

Claude waited, but Mrs. Haney was not saying anything more. "All right, I'll do it myself," he murmured. "Thanks, Mrs. Haney. Goodbye."

I'll leave it up to you. Damn her, anyway. You couldn't even depend on a cousin!

He'd wait till tomorrow to phone the super, he thought. Something might still happen tonight. Maybe Lola had been intending to throw an after-theater party tonight. Claude prayed so.

He turned on the radio, hoping there would be something in the news about a body found in a Manhattan apartment. Nothing. The weather report was for showers this evening and tomorrow.

Rain would wash the fingerprints off the glasses on the terrace—if it were a hard rain. He'd better talk to the super today.

Claude didn't know the superintendent's last name, only that he was called Joe and lived in the house next door. He called the rental agency for Lola's building, and asked the telephone number of the superintendent called Joe who took care of Lola's building on Grove Street. The superintendent's name was Donovan, the agency said, and they gave Claude his telephone number.

Claude was lucky enough to find Joe at home.

"Listen," Claude said, "I'm very concerned about a tenant in eighty-seven-and-a-half. Miss Lola Parsons. She hasn't answered her telephone since Sunday. Would you be good enough to open her apartment door and see if everything's all right?"

"Miss Parsons? If she don't answer her bell, she don't answer it. She gets people coming by all hours of the night. She don't always let them in." Joe sounded as if he were chewing something.

"I'm not asking you to ring her bell. This is her husband, Claude Merrivale. Remember me? I used to live there. I'm asking you to open her door with your master key."

"Um-m," Joe said, as if he weren't sure whether to believe him or not. "She's probably away for a coupla days. She goes away sometimes."

"But I happen to know—" Claude stopped. No use going into Lola's bad cold again. "You will go in, won't you? Just take a look in today."

"All right, I will," Joe said.

Claude couldn't tell if he meant it or not. "I'll call back a little later to check with you."

Claude paced his floor. He looked at the sky. A patch of sunlight through the drifting gray clouds cheered him. A good thing fingerprints didn't evaporate, he thought. But suppose the rain came earlier than this evening—say, in an hour, before the super got there? He wasn't sure Ralph's fingerprints would be anywhere but on the terrace. They *might* be, but how could he be sure?

It was incredible that nobody was concerned, that a corpse could lie for 48 hours in an apartment without anybody knowing it! Claude paced the floor until after 4:00, then he rang Joe back.

"He ain't here," a woman's voice said. "He ain't coming back till late. Maybe nine o'clock. He's got a plumbing job to do on Perry Street." Her voice was shrill and uncooperative.

"Do you know if he went into Miss Parsons' apartment?"

"Whose?—He ain't been in nobody's apartment."

Claude sighed. "All right. Tell him Mr. Merrivale telephoned and I'll call him back after nine."

"Who?"

Claude spelled it for her. "Mrs.—Miss Parsons' husband." He wiped the sweat from his forehead and poured himself a stiff brandy.

At 9:15 that evening he tried Joe again. Joe was not home yet, and it was plain from Mrs. Donovan's tone that she had no intention of asking her husband to open an apartment for no good reason and after he'd been working late besides.

Claude went to bed exhausted, but unable to fall asleep. At least it wasn't raining, but the radio and TV forecast rain "late tomorrow afternoon."

Wednesday arrived, cloudy and hot. Claude called Joe Donovan very early, but not early enough, because Joe was already out on his rounds. Mrs. Donovan promised to tell him about Miss Parsons' apartment when he came in for lunch, and Claude said he would call again at lunchtime.

Claude rang again at 12:15. Joe wasn't coming home for lunch today, his wife said, and she didn't know where he was just now.

Claude was now at a complete loss. He turned on his radio and tried to get a weather report. Finally he heard one.

". . . That rain we've all been praying for may yet materialize this afternoon. Cooler winds from Canada are on the way and when they hit this blanket of heat that's been hanging over New York for the past six days—*boy!* That's when most of you, I imagine, will yell, 'What a relief!' And my guess is you'll head for the refrigerator for a bottle of America's finest beer—*bru-u-rrr-p* . . ." Claude had turned it off. He began to bite his nails.

He tried the McLains again. A strange voice answered, a sleepy male voice. "Can I speak to Liz, please?"

"Oh—uh—Liz is away till next Sunday. Out of town. . . No, Ed's staying with some friends uptown. They lent me the apartment for a few days. Want Ed's number?"

Claude hesitated. It was all too complicated. "No, thanks."

He was shaking. Today was *Wednesday.* He poured another brandy and looked out at the sky. The clouds were milling.

He tried Joe again. The telephone didn't answer.

But the rain held off. Dusk fell. The weather reports bemoaned the aborted deluge. Claude smiled. It was going to blow over. And tomorrow Colette would arrive at 5:00, with the key.

Thursday. Hotter and muggier, but the sun was penetrating a little, like a weak electric light in a steamy bathroom. The weather report that Claude caught at 8:00 a.m., however, guaranteed rain by mid-afternoon.

". . .This time it's for real, folks, so take your raincoat when you go off to work today. Every observation station on the Northeastern seaboard is predicting rain and plenty of it to cool the sweltering cities of the entire—"

Claude rang Joe immediately after hearing that.

"Listen, mister," Joe said, "I'm getting a little tired of this. I've got a lot of things to do besides disturb somebody who doesn't want to be disturbed . . . Oh, yeah? Well, maybe you don't know Miss Parsons as well as I do . . . No, sir. I'm sorry. G'bye."

All the sky needed, Claude thought, was a bolt of lightning.

He decided to ring Colette and ask if she couldn't come earlier to Grove Street.

Just before he picked up his telephone it rang.

"Hello, Claude!" an energetic young voice cried. "This is Peter Parsons. Do you happen to know where Lola is? How are you, anyway?"

"Peter! For goodness' sake!" Peter was Lola's nephew. "When did you—"

"I'm just passing through. Sailing this afternoon for England. I thought I'd crash in on my aunt and maybe have lunch with her, but I can't get an answer at her place. I wanted to borrow a suitcase from her, too. Do you think she could be sleeping through the phone?"

"No. I've been ringing her too for the last—well, for a couple of days. Why don't you go hammer on her door? Matter of fact, I've asked the super to open her apartment, but he hasn't yet, so you might ask him to, if you want the suitcase. His name's Donovan, and he lives in the house next door to the left of Lola's as you face her house. I'll ring and tell him you're coming down."

"Okay, but I can't get down till about twelve. I've got some shopping to do."

"Oh. I'll ring the super anyway. And Peter—let me know if you see her, will you? I'm really quite concerned."

"Why?"

"Because I can't reach her, either!"

"Okay, I'll let you know."

Claude gave a faint sigh of relief. Peter would get in. He was a determined young man, and if he needed a suitcase—Claude picked up the telephone and dialed Joe's number, which he knew by heart now. Joe was there. Claude told him that Miss Parsons' nephew was arriving around noon to pick up a suitcase, and would he please let him into Miss Parsons' apartment?

"I'm not gonna be here at noon," Joe said.

"Can't you leave the key with your wife?"

"I don't know this nephew," Joe said. "How do I know he's her nephew? I couldn't let him take anything out of the apartment, no, sir!"

For a moment Claude thought of going down himself, waiting for Peter and insisting that the door be opened; then he realized he couldn't face it. Not after all this time. "I asked you to go into the apartment *yesterday*. You didn't. I'm asking you now to go in immediately!"

"Why?"

"I want to know if everything's all right in there!"

"Everything's all right, mister, nothing's on fire. I don't know what you're so up in the air about."

Claude started to say something, then slammed the telephone down on the hook. "Supers," he muttered. "Not one in New York who earns his pay."

The phone rang at 11:30 a.m. It was Joyce, wanting to set a meeting place for this evening. Claude couldn't think of anything, so Joyce suggested a restaurant on Eighth Avenue, which she said was close to the theater. As Claude put the telephone down he heard a businesslike rumble of thunder.

It was quite dark in his room. He turned the light on and paced the floor. At 12:30 he rang Joe again. Joe was out and his wife hung up on Claude.

2:00.

3:00.

The rain was still holding off.

There was no call from either Peter or the police. Claude guessed what must have happened: Peter had rung the doorbell and got no answer, had found the superintendent out, and had not bothered phoning Claude. Irresponsibility, that's what it was!

Maybe the rain would hold off until after 5:00 p.m., he hoped. If it had held off this long, why not two more hours? He made himself sit down with a brandy, and tried to convince himself that it wouldn't rain until 6:00, that Colette would immediately call the police when she found the body at 5:00, that the police would tell her not to touch a thing, and that she would not attempt to tidy up the terrace before the police got there.

Suddenly there was a tremendous clap of thunder that made Claude splash brandy and soda out of his glass onto the carpet, and then the rain fell. Within seconds it was pounding, and there was a gusty wind that would certainly blow over the highball glasses, if not the little terrace table. Claude swallowed drily, picturing the glasses broken, the bottles rolling on the terrace, and every square inch of their surface washed clean of fingerprints.

The rain lasted till after 4:00, then became a sprinkle. Claude lay on his bed and put his pillow over his head.

5:00.

5:30.

Claude was almost reaching for the phone to call Colette at Lola's—he thought it would seem normal to call—when the telephone rang. He let it ring three times before he picked it up and said in an easy voice, "Yes?"

"Is this Claude Merrivale?"

"Yes."

"This is Detective Greenley, City Police. Could you come to your wife's apartment on Grove Street right away, please?"

"Y-yes. What's the trouble? Is she all right? I've been—"

"She's not all right. You'd better brace yourself for a shock. She's been murdered, Mr. Merrivale. Can you come down right away?"

Claude put on his best suit, and left his apartment. There just might be some fingerprints left on the terrace, he thought, or there might be some prints of Ralph's in the living room. But by this time it was going to be so hard to establish *when* she was killed.

When Claude arrived there were four men in the living room. Lola's body lay where he had last seen it on the floor, partly covered now by a blanket. Colette sat crumpled in a chair, weeping.

"Who're you?" a policeman asked him.

"I'm her husband," he said. "Claude Merrivale." He saw that his name made no impression on the police.

When had he last seen her? Thursday evening, a week ago. He did not live with her? No, they were separated, but they had intended to live together again very soon. Had he any idea who might have killed her?

"I know a young man visited her on Sunday afternoon," Claude said. "I wasn't able to reach my wife all week. I've been extremely worried."

"Who is the young man?"

"Ralph Carpenter. He's an aspiring actor, and my wife's been giving him money from time to time to live on. But I happen to know that my wife told him on Sunday that she was not giving him any more money in the future. I think it's possible," Claude went on, sidling toward the French windows so that he could see the terrace, "knowing Ralph as I do, that he might have killed her in a burst of temper."

Claude saw that the terrace was a shambles of broken glass, overturned bottles, cigarette butts, and that no one was trying to get any fingerprints from the glass fragments. The glider was soaked. A detective picked up a few of the cigarette butts and looked at them.

"All Chesterfields," the detective remarked.

Chesterfield was Lola's brand. Trust Ralph not to smoke his own cigarettes, Claude thought, if he could take someone else's.

"Pretty much messed up by the rain," the detective said. "Or else they had a fight out here. Can't get any prints here, anyway."

"Try," said his superior in the living room. "Mind if we take your prints meanwhile, Mr. Merrivale?"

"Of course not." Claude submitted to his fingertips being pressed down on an ink pad, then onto a paper.

The superior carried the paper over to the mantel. One of Lola's silver bracelets was on the mantel, Claude saw. The man was comparing, through a magnifying glass, Claude's prints on the paper with some white-powder prints on the bracelet. Claude shuddered. He hadn't thought that he might have touched her bracelets—but he had. He remembered holding one of the bracelets up a little when he had felt for—

"How does that thumb look?" asked the superior.

"That's it," said the detective, peering over his shoulder.

The other man turned to Claude. "Mr. Merrivale, how do you explain that your thumbprint is on your wife's bracelet, when you say you haven't seen her since last Thursday night? The maid saw her on Saturday. Isn't that right, Miss Colette?"

"That is right, m'sieur," Colette said.

Claude felt as if he had no makeup on, not even any clothes. So much for his alibis, for his efforts to get *somebody* into the apartment before it was too late. If not for the rain they'd have got the prints off the terrace and never thought of looking at the bracelets!

"Maybe you'll feel like talking a little more when you get to headquarters, Mr. Merrivale?"

"I'm perfectly willing to go," said Claude, and straightened his shoulders. He followed the police, his head up.

But he'd break down at the station, he knew. He couldn't go on with the lie about Ralph. Now he'd never get any of Lola's income or her bank account. He'd end his life as a condemned murderer. It was people who had let him down, starting with Colette, then Joyce who hadn't been interested enough to do anything, then all the others. *People!*

"What'd you say, Mr. Merrivale?" the detective asked him as they were about to step into the police car.

Claude had been muttering to himself. Now he said out loud, and with conviction, "You can't depend on *anybody!* That's what I said!" And he climbed into the car.

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A little gem of a tale . . .

THE PHYSICIAN AND THE OPIUM FIEND

by R. L. STEVENS

THE LAMPLIGHTS along Cavendish Square were just being lit, casting a soft pale glow across the damp London night, as Blair slipped from the court behind Dr. Lanyon's house. It had been another failure, another robbery of a physician's office that yielded him but a few shillings. He cursed silently and started across the Square, then drew back quickly as a hansom cab hurried past, the horse's hoofs clattering on the cobblestones.

At times he wished it could end this easily, with his body crushed beneath a two-wheeler. Perhaps then he might be free of the terrible craving that growled within him, forcing him to a life of housebreaking and theft.

William Blair was an opium fiend. He still remembered the first time he had eaten opium, popping the little pill of brown gum into his mouth and washing it down with coffee as de Quincey had sometimes done. He remembered the gradual creeping thrill that soon took possession of every part of his body. And he remembered too the deadly sickness of his stomach, the furred tongue and dreadful headache that followed his first experience as an opium eater.

He should have stopped the diabolical practise then, but he hadn't. In three days' time he had recourse to the drug once more, and after that his body seemed to crave it with increasing frequency. It was his frantic search for opium which now led him nightly to the offices of famous physicians, to the citadels of medicine that lined Cavendish Square. He had broken into ten of them in the past fortnight, but only two had yielded a quantity of opium sufficient to ease his terrible burthen.

And so it was in a state bordering desperation that Blair entered the quiet bystreet that ran north from the Square. He had gone some distance past the shops and homes when he

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chanced to note a high, two-storey building that thrust forward its windowless gable on the street. He was familiar enough with doctors' laboratories in this section of London to suspect that here might be one, hidden away behind this neglected, discoloured brick wall. But only a blistered and distained wooden door gave entry into the building from this street, and the door was equipped with neither bell nor knocker.

Hurriedly he retraced his steps to the corner, avoiding a helmeted bobby who was crossing the street in the opposite direction. He waited until the police-officer had disappeared from view, his hand ready on the dagger in his pocket. As he moved on, a few drops of water struck his forehead. It was beginning to rain.

Round the corner he came upon a square of ancient, handsome houses. Though many were beginning to show the unmistakable signs of age, the second house from the corner still wore a great air of wealth and comfort. It was all in darkness except for the fanlight, but the glow from this was sufficient for him to decipher the lettering on the brass name-plate. He had guessed correctly. It was indeed a doctor's residence. He set to work at once as the rain increased.

It took him only a few moments of skillful probing with the dagger to prize open one of the shuttered windows. Then he was through it and into a flagged hall lined with costly oaken cabinets. The doctor was obviously wealthy, and Blair hoped this meant a well stocked laboratory. He moved cautiously along the hall, fearful of any noise which might give the alarm. The house could have been empty, but it was possible the good doctor had retired early and was asleep upstairs.

Blair made his way to the rear of the first floor, heading in the direction of the windowless gable he had observed from the street. He passed into the connecting building and through a large darkened area that, by the light of his Brymay safety-matches, appeared to be an old dissecting room, strewn with crates and littered with packing straw, and dusty with disuse. Blair moved through it to a stairway at the rear. This would lead to the second floor of the windowless gable, his last hope of finding a supply of opium.

The door at the top of the stair was a heavy barrier covered with red baize, and it took him ten minutes ere he finally forced it inward with a loud screech. The disclosed room proved to be the small office-laboratory he sought—his work had not been in vain! The remains of a dying fire still glowed on the hearth, casting a pale orange glow about the room. The laboratory had been in use that very night, and in such a home the storage shelves would be well stocked.

It took him but a brief search to discover, amidst the chemical apparatus, a large bottle labeled LAUDANUM. This was a tincture of opium, he knew, and no less an authority than de Quincey had reckoned twenty-five drops of laudanum to be the equivalent of one grain of pure opium. Yes, this would satisfy his need.

His hand was just closing over the bottle when a voice from the doorway rasped, "Who is there? Who are you?"

Blair whirled to face the man, the dagger ready in his hand. "Get back," he warned. "I am armed."

The figure in the doorway reached up to light the gas flame, and Blair saw that he was a large, well-made, smooth-faced man of perhaps fifty, with a countenance that was undeniably handsome. "What do you want here, man? This is my laboratory. There is no money here!"

"I need—" began Blair, feeling the perspiration collecting on his forehead. "I need opium."

There was a sharp intake of breath from the handsome doctor. "My God! Have conditions in London come to this? Do opium fiends now prowl the streets and break into physicians' homes in search of this devilish drug?"

"Get out of my way," returned Blair, "or I will kill you!"

"Wait! Let me—let me try to help you in some way. Let me summon the police. This craving that obsesses you will destroy you in time. You need help, medical treatment."

As he spoke, the doctor moved forward slowly, forcing Blair back towards the far wall of the room. "I don't want help," sobbed the cornered man. "It's too late to help me now."

The doctor took a step closer. "It is never too late! Don't you realize what this drug is doing to you, man? Don't you see how it releases everything that is cruel and sick and evil in you? Under the influence of opium, or any drug, you become a different person. You are no longer in command of your own will."

Blair had backed to the wall now, and he could feel its chill firmness through his coat. He raised the dagger menacingly. "Come any closer, Sawbones, and I swear I will kill you!"

The doctor hesitated a moment. He glanced at the darkened skylight above their heads, where the rain was now beating a steady tattoo upon the glass. Then he said, "The mind of man is his greatest gift. To corrupt it, to poison it with drugs, is something hateful and immoral. I hope that I am never in a position where I lose control of my free will because I have surrendered to the dark side of my nature. You, poor soul, are helpless in the grip of this opium, like the wretched folk who smoke it in the illegal dens, curled upon their bunks and oblivious of the outer world."

"I—I—" began Blair, but the words were lost in his throat. The physician was right, he knew, but he was beyond caring now, beyond distinguishing between right and wrong. He only knew that the doctor had forced him further from the bottle of laudanum.

"Let me call the police," urged the doctor, softly.

"No!"

The physician's hand moved, all in a flash, seizing one of the bottles from the shelf beside him and hurling it upwards through the skylight. There was a shattering of glass and a shower of silvery white pellets from the bottle. Then a sudden violet flame seemed to engulf the entire skylight, burning with a hissing sound that ended almost at once with a burst of explosive violence.

Terrified, Blair tried to lunge past the doctor, but the large hands were instantly upon him, fastening on his coat and wrist, forcing the dagger away.

They were still locked in a life-and-death, silent struggle when, moments later, a helmeted bobby burst into the laboratory. "What's happening here, sir? I saw the flame and heard the explosion—"

"Help me with this man," shouted the physician. "He's trying to steal opium!"

Within seconds Blair was helpless, his arms pinioned to his sides by the burly police-officer. "Take me," he mumbled. "Take me and lock me up. Help me."

Another bobby arrived on the scene, attracted by the noise and flame. "What was it?" he asked the doctor.

"I had to signal you somehow," he told them. "There were potassium pellets in the bottle and I took a risk that enough rainwater had collected on the skylight to set off a chemical reaction. Potassium reacts even more violently with water than does sodium."

"You were successful," returned the second policeman. "I heard that boom two streets away."

The doctor was busy moving some of his equipment out of the rain which was still falling through the shattered skylight. "I think with treatment this man can be saved," said he. "It is his addiction that has led him into a life of crime."

"I would not worry too much about him, sir. He could have killed you with this dagger."

"But I do worry about him, as I would about any human being. As for myself, I was much more fearful that he would wreck my laboratory. I have been engaged in some important experiments here, relating to transcendental medicine, and I feel I am on the verge of discovery."

The first police-officer pulled Blair towards the door. "Then we will leave you alone to clean up, sir. And good luck with your experiments." He was half-way out the door when he paused and said, "O, by the by, sir, I will need your name for my report. I did not have time to catch it on the brass outside."

"Certainly," replied the physician, with a smile. "The name is Jekyll. Doctor Henry Jekyll."

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MIDNIGHT BLUE

by ROSS MACDONALD

IT HAD RAINED IN the canyon during the night. The world had the colored freshness of a butterfly just emerged from the chrysalis stage and trembling in the sun. Actual butterflies danced in flight across free spaces of air or played a game of tag without any rules among the tree branches. At this height there were giant pines among the eucalyptus trees.

I parked my car where I usually parked it, in the shadow of the stone building just inside the gates of the old estate. Just inside the posts, that is—the gates had long since fallen from their rusted hinges. The owner of the country house had died in Europe, and the place had stood empty since the war. It was one reason I came here on the occasional Sunday when I wanted to get away from the Hollywood rat race. Nobody lived within two miles.

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Until now, anyway. The window of the gatehouse overlooking the drive had been broken the last time that I'd noticed it. Now it was patched up with a piece of cardboard. Through a hole punched in the middle of the cardboard, bright emptiness watched me—human eye's bright emptiness.

"Hello," I said.

A grudging voice answered, "Hello."

The gatehouse door creaked open, and a white-haired man came out. A smile sat strangely on his ravaged face. He walked mechanically, shuffling in the leaves, as if his body was not at home in the world. He wore faded denims through which his clumsy muscles bulged like animals in a sack. His feet were bare.

I saw when he came up to me that he was a huge old man, a head taller than I was and a foot wider. His smile was not a greeting or any kind of smile that I could respond to. It was the stretched, blind grimace of a man who lived in a world of his own, a world that didn't include me.

"Get out of here. I don't want trouble. I don't want nobody messing around."

"No trouble," I said. "I came up to do a little target shooting. I probably have as much right here as you have."

His eyes widened. They were as blue and empty as holes in his head through which I could see the sky.

"Nobody has the rights here that I have. I lifted up mine eyes unto the hills and the voice spoke and I found sanctuary. Nobody's going to force me out of my sanctuary."

I could feel the short hairs bristling on the back of my neck. Though my instincts didn't say so, he was probably a harmless nut. I tried to keep my instincts out of my voice.

"I won't bother you. You don't bother me. That should be fair enough."

"You bother me just *being* here. I can't stand people. I can't stand cars. And this is twice in two days you come up harrying me and harassing me."

"I haven't been here for a month."

"You're an Ananias liar." His voice whined like a rising wind. He clenched his knobbed fists and shuddered on the verge of violence.

"Calm down, old man," I said. "There's room in the world for both of us."

He looked around at the high green world as if my words had snapped him out of a dream.

"You're right," he said in a different voice. "I have been blessed, and I must remember to be joyful. Creation belongs to all of us poor creatures." His smiling teeth were as long and yellow as an old horse's. His roving glance fell on my car. "And it wasn't you who come up here last night. It was a different automobile. I remember."

He turned away, muttering something about washing his socks, and dragged his horny feet back into the gatehouse. I got my targets, pistol, and ammunition out of the trunk, and locked the car up tight. The old man watched me through his peephole, but he didn't come out again.

Below the road, in the wild canyon, there was an open meadow backed by a sheer bank which was topped by the crumbling wall of the estate. It was my shooting gallery. I slid down the wet grass of the bank and tacked a target to an oak tree, using the butt of my heavy-framed .22 as a hammer.

While I was loading it, something caught my eye—something that glinted red, like a ruby among the leaves. I stooped to pick it up and found that it was attached. It was a red-enameled fingernail at the tip of a white hand. The hand was cold and stiff.

I let out a sound that must have been loud in the stillness. A jaybird erupted from a manzanita, sailed up to a high limb of the oak, and yelled down curses at me. A dozen chickadees flew out of the oak and settled in another at the far end of the meadow.

Panting like a dog, I scraped away the dirt and wet leaves that had been loosely piled over the body. It was the body of a girl wearing a midnight-blue sweater and skirt. She was a blonde, about 17. The blood that congested her face made her look old and dark. The white rope with which she had been garroted was sunk almost out of sight in the flesh of her neck. The rope was tied at the nape in what is called a granny's knot, the kind of knot that any child can tie.

I left her where she lay and climbed back up to the road on trembling knees. The grass showed traces of the track her body had made where someone had dragged it down the bank. I looked for tire marks on the shoulder and in the rutted, impacted gravel of the road. If there had been any, the rain had washed them out.

I trudged up the road to the gatehouse and knocked on the door. It creaked inward under my hand. Inside there was nothing alive but the spiders that had webbed the low black beams. A dustless rectangle in front of the stone fireplace showed where a bedroll had lain. Several blackened tin cans had evidently been used as cooking utensils. Gray embers lay on the cavernous hearth. Suspended above it from a spike in the mantel was a pair of white cotton work socks. The socks were wet. Their owner had left in a hurry.

It wasn't my job to hunt him. I drove down the canyon to the highway and along it for a few miles to the outskirts of the nearest town. There a drab green box of a building with a flag in front of it housed the Highway Patrol. Across the highway was a lumberyard, deserted on Sunday.

"Too bad about Ginnie," the dispatcher said when she had radioed the local sheriff. She was a thirtyish brunette with fine black eyes and dirty fingernails. She had on a plain white blouse, which was full of her.

"Do you know Ginnie?"

"My young sister knows her. They go—they went to high school together. It's an awful thing when it happens to a young person like that. I knew she was missing—I got the report when I came on at eight—but I kept hoping that she was just off on a lost weekend, like. Now there's nothing to hope for, is there?" Her eyes were liquid with feeling. "Poor Ginnie. And poor Mr. Green."

"Her father?"

"That's right. He was in here with her high school counselor not more than an hour ago. I hope he doesn't come back right away. I don't want to be the one that has to tell him."

"How long has the girl been missing?"

"Just since last night. We got the report here about three a.m., I think. Apparently she wandered away from a party at Cavern Beach. Down the pike a ways." She pointed south toward the canyon mouth.

"What kind of party was it?"

"Some of the kids from the Union High School—they took some wienies down and had a fire. The party was part of graduation week. I happen to know about it because my young sister Alice went. I didn't want her to go, even if it was supervised. That can be a dangerous beach at night. All sorts of bums and scroungers hang out in the caves. Why, one night when I was a kid I saw a naked man down there in the moonlight. He didn't have a woman with him, either."

She caught the drift of her words, did a slow blush, and checked her loquacity. I leaned on the plywood counter between us.

"What sort of girl was Ginnie Green?"

"I wouldn't know. I never really knew her."

"Your sister does."

"I don't let my sister run around with girls like Ginnie Green. Does that answer your question?"

"Not in any detail."

"It seems to me you ask a lot of questions."

"I'm naturally interested, since I found her. Also, I'm a private detective."

"Looking for a job?"

"I can always use a job."

"So can I, and I've got one and I don't intend to lose it." She softened the words with a smile. "Excuse me; I have work to do."

She turned to her short-wave and sent out a message to the patrol cars that Virginia Green had been found. Virginia Green's father heard it as he came in the door. He was a puffy gray-faced man with red-rimmed eyes. Striped pajama bottoms showed below the cuffs of his trousers. His shoes were muddy, and he walked as if he had been walking all night.

He supported himself on the edge of the counter, opening and shutting his mouth like a beached fish. Words came out, half strangled by shock.

"I heard you say she was dead, Anita."

The woman raised her eyes to his. "Yes. I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Green."

He put his face down on the counter and stayed there like a penitent, perfectly still. I could hear a clock somewhere, snipping off seconds, and in the back of the room the L.A. police signals like muttering voices coming in from another planet. Another planet very much like this one, where violence measured out the hours.

"It's my fault," Green said to the bare wood under his face. "I didn't bring her up properly. I haven't been a good father."

The woman watched him with dark and glistening eyes ready to spill. She stretched out an unconscious hand to touch him, pulled her hand back in embarrassment when a second man came into the station. He was a young man with crew-cut brown hair, tanned and fit-looking in a Hawaiian shirt. Fit-looking except for the glare of sleeplessness in his eyes and the anxious lines around them.

"What is it, Miss Brocco? What's the word?"

"The word is bad." She sounded angry. "Somebody murdered Ginnie Green. This man here is a detective and he just found her body up in Trumbull Canyon."

The young man ran his fingers through his short hair and failed to get a grip on it, or on himself. "My God! That's terrible!"

"Yes," the woman said. "You were supposed to be looking after her, weren't you?"

They glared at each other across the counter. The tips of her breasts pointed at him through her blouse like accusing fingers. The young man lost the glaring match. He turned to me with a wilted look.

"My name is Connor, Franklin Connor, and I'm afraid I'm very much to blame in this. I'm a counselor at the high school, and I was supposed to be looking after the party, as Miss Brocco said."

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't realize. I mean, I thought they were all perfectly happy and safe. The boys and girls had pretty well paired off around the fire. Frankly, I felt rather out of place. They aren't children, you know. They were all seniors, they had cars. So I said good night and walked home along the beach. As a matter of fact, I was hoping for a phone call from my wife."

"What time did you leave the party?"

"It must have been nearly eleven. The ones who hadn't paired off had gone home."

"Who did Ginnie pair off with?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid I wasn't paying too much attention to the kids. It's graduation week, and I've had a lot of problems—"

The father, Green, had been listening with a changing face. In a sudden yammering rage his implosive grief and guilt exploded outward.

"It's your business to know! By God, I'll have your job for this. I'll make it *my* business to run you out of town."

Connor hung his head and looked at the stained tile floor. There was a thin spot in his short brown hair, and his scalp gleamed through it like bare white bone. It was turning into a bad day for everybody, and I felt the dull old nagging pull of other people's trouble, like a toothache you can't leave alone.

The sheriff arrived, flanked by several deputies and an HP sergeant. He wore a Western hat and a rawhide tie and a blue gabardine business suit which together produced a kind of gun-smog effect. His name was Pearsall.

I rode back up the canyon in the right front seat of Pearsall's black Buick, filling him in on the way. The deputies' Ford and an HP car followed us, and

Green's new Oldsmobile convertible brought up the rear.

The sheriff said, "The old guy sounds like a loony to me."

"He's a loner, anyway."

"You never can tell about them hoboes. That's why I give my boys instructions to roust 'em. Well, it looks like an open-and-shut case."

"Maybe. Let's keep our minds open anyway, Sheriff."

"Sure. Sure. But the old guy went on the run. That shows consciousness of guilt. Don't worry, we'll hunt him down. I got men that know these hills like you know your wife's geography."

"I'm not married."

"Your girl friend, then." He gave me a sideways leer that was no gift. "And if we can't find him on foot, we'll use the air squadron."

"You have an air squadron?"

"Volunteers, mostly local ranchers. We'll get him." His tires squealed on a curve. "Was the girl raped?"

"I didn't try to find out. I'm not a doctor. I left her as she was."

The sheriff grunted. "You did the right thing at that."

Nothing had changed in the high meadow. The girl lay waiting to have her picture taken. It was taken many times, from several angles. All the birds flew away. Her father leaned on a tree and watched them go. Later he was sitting on the ground.

I volunteered to drive him home. It wasn't pure altruism. I'm incapable of it. I said when I had turned his Oldsmobile, "Why did you say it was your fault, Mr. Green?"

He wasn't listening. Below the road four uniformed men were wrestling a heavy covered aluminum stretcher up the steep bank. Green watched them as he had watched the departing birds, until they were out of sight around a curve.

"She was so young," he said to the back seat.

I waited, and tried again. "Why did you blame yourself for her death?"

He roused himself from his daze. "Did I say that?"

"In the Highway Patrol office you said something of the sort."

He touched my arm. "I didn't mean I killed her."

"I didn't think you meant that. I'm interested in finding out who did."

"Are you a cop—a policeman?"

"I have been."

"You're not with the locals."

"No. I happen to be a private detective from Los Angeles. The name is Archer."

He sat and pondered this

information. Below and ahead the summer sea brimmed up in the mouth of the canyon.

"You don't think the old tramp did her in?" Green said.

"It's hard to figure out how he could have. He's a strong-looking old buzzard, but he couldn't have carried her all the way up from the beach. And she wouldn't have come along with him of her own accord."

It was a question, in a way.

"I don't know," her father said. "Ginnie was a little wild—she'd do a thing *because* it was wrong, *because* it was dangerous. She hated to turn down a dare, especially from a man."

"There were men in her life?"

"She was attractive to men. You saw her, even as she is." He gulped. "Don't get me wrong. Ginnie was never a *bad* girl. She was a little headstrong, and I made mistakes. That's why I blame myself."

"What sort of mistakes, Mr. Green?"

"All the usual ones, and some I made up on my own." His voice was bitter. "Ginnie didn't have a mother, you see. Her mother left me years ago, and it was as much my fault as hers. I tried to bring her up myself. I didn't give her proper supervision. I run a restaurant in town, and I don't get home nights till after midnight. Ginnie was pretty much on her own since she was in grade school. We got along fine when I was there, but I usually wasn't there.

"The worst mistake I made was letting her work in the restaurant over the weekends. That started about a year ago. She wanted the money for clothes, and I thought the discipline would be good for her. I thought I could keep an eye on her, you know. But it didn't work out. She grew up too fast, and the night work played hell with her studies.

"I finally got the word from the school authorities. I fired her a couple of months ago, but I guess it was too late. We haven't been getting along too well since then. Mr. Connor said she resented my indecision, that I gave her too much responsibility and then took it away again."

"You've talked her over with Connor?"

"More than once, including last night. He was her academic counselor, and he was concerned about her grades. We both were. Ginnie finally pulled through, after all, thanks to him. She was going to graduate. Not that it matters now, of course."

Green was silent for a time. The sea expanded below us like a second blue dawn. I could hear the roar of the highway. Green touched my elbow again, as if he needed human contact.

"I oughtn't to've blown my top at Connor. He's a decent boy, he means well. He gave my daughter hours of free tutoring this last month. And he's got troubles of his own, like he said."

"What troubles?"

"I happen to know his wife left him, same as mine. I shouldn't have borne down so hard on him. I have a lousy temper, always have had." He hesitated, then blurted out as if he had found a confessor, "I said a terrible thing to Ginnie at supper last night. She always has supper with me at the restaurant. I said if she wasn't home when I got home last night that I'd wring her neck."

"And she wasn't home," I said. And somebody wrung her neck, I didn't say.

The light at the highway was red. I glanced at Green. Tear tracks glistened like snail tracks on his face.

"Tell me what happened last night."

"There isn't anything much to tell," he said. "I got to the house about twelve thirty, and, like you said, she wasn't home. So I called Al Brocco's house. He's my night cook, and I knew his youngest daughter Alice was at the moonlight party on the beach. Alice was home all right."

"Did you talk to Alice?"

"She was in bed asleep. Al woke her up, but I didn't talk to her. She told him she didn't know where Ginnie was. I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. Finally I got up and called Mr. Connor. That was about one thirty. I thought I should get in touch with the authorities, but he said no, Ginnie had enough black marks against her already. He came over to the house and we waited for a while and then we went down to Cavern Beach.

"There was no trace of her. I said it was time to call in the authorities, and he agreed. We went to his beach house, because it was nearer, and called the sheriff's office from there. We went back to the beach with a couple of flashlights and went through the caves. He stayed with me all night. I give him that."

"Where are these caves?"

"We'll pass them in a minute. I'll show you if you want. But there's nothing in any of the three of them."

Nothing but shadows and empty beer cans, the odor of rotting kelp. I got sand in my shoes and sweat under my collar. The sun dazzled my eyes when I half walked, half crawled, from the last cave.

Green was waiting beside a heap of ashes.

"This is where they had the wienie roast," he said.

I kicked the ashes. A half-burned sausage rolled along the sand. Sand fleas hopped in the sun like fat on a griddle. Green and I faced each other over the dead fire. He looked out to sea. A seal's face floated like a small black nose cone beyond the breakers. Farther out a water skier slid between unfolding wings of spray.

Away up the beach two people were walking toward us. They were small and lonely and distinct as Chirico figures in the long white distance.

Green squinted against the sun. Red-rimmed or not, his eyes were good. "I believe that's Mr. Connor. I wonder who the woman is with him."

They were walking as close as lovers, just above the white margin of the surf. They pulled apart when they noticed us, but they were still holding hands as they approached.

"It's Mrs. Connor," Green said in a low voice.

"I thought you said she left him."

"That's what he told me last night. She took off on him a couple of weeks ago, couldn't stand a high school teacher's hours. She must have changed her mind."

She looked as though she had a mind to change. She was a hard-faced blonde who walked like a man. A certain amount of style took the curse off her stiff angularity. She had on a madras shirt, mannishly cut, and a pair of Capri pants that hugged her long slim legs.

Connor looked at us in complex embarrassment. "I thought it was you from a distance, Mr. Green. I don't believe you know my wife."

"I've seen her in my place of business." He explained to the woman, "I run the Highway Restaurant in town."

"How do you do," she said aloofly, then added in an entirely different voice, "You're Virginia's father, aren't you? I'm so sorry."

The words sounded queer. Perhaps it was the surroundings; the ashes on the beach, the entrances to the caves, the sea, and the empty sky which dwarfed us all. Green answered her solemnly.

"Thank you, ma'am. Mr. Connor was a strong right arm to me last night, I can tell you." He was apologizing. And Connor responded, "Why don't you come to our place for a drink? It's just down the beach. You look as if you could use one, Mr. Green. You too," he said to me. "I don't believe I know your name."

"Archer. Lew Archer."

He gave me a hard hand. His wife interposed, "I'm sure Mr. Green and his friend won't want to be bothered with us on a day like this. Besides, it isn't even noon yet, Frank."

She was the one who didn't want to be bothered. We stood around for a minute, exchanging grim, nonsensical comments on the beauty of the day. Then she led Connor back in the direction they had come from. Private Property, her attitude seemed to say: Trespassers will be fresh-frozen.

I drove Green to the Highway Patrol station. He said that he was feeling better, and could make it home from there by himself. He thanked me profusely for being a friend in need to him, as he put it. He followed me to the door of the station, thanking me.

The dispatcher was cleaning her fingernails with an ivory-handled file. She glanced up.

"Did they catch him yet?"

"I was going to ask you the same question, Miss Brocco."

"No such luck. But they'll get him," she said with female vindictiveness. "The sheriff called out his air squadron, and he sent to Ventura for bloodhounds."

"Big deal."

She bridled. "What do you mean by that?"

"I don't think the old man of the mountain killed her. I he had, he wouldn't have waited till this morning to g on the lam. He'd have taken of right away."

"Then why did he go on the lam at all?" The word sounded strange in her prim mouth.

"I think he saw me discover the body, and realized he'd be blamed."

She considered this, bending the long nail file between her fingers. "If the old tramp didn't do it, who did?"

"You may be able to help me answer that question."

"Me help you? How?"

"You know Frank Connor, for one thing."

"I know him. I've seen him about my sister's grades a few times."

"You don't seem to like him much."

"I don't like him, I don't dislike him. He's just blah to me."

"Why? What's the matter with him?"

Her tight mouth quivered, and let out words. "I don't know what's the matter with him. He can't keep his hands off of young girls."

"How do you know that?"

"I heard it."

"From your sister Alice?"

"Yes. The rumor was going around the school, she said."

"Did the rumor involve Ginnie Green?"

She nodded. Her eyes were as black as fingerprint ink.

"Is that why Connor's wife left him?"

"I wouldn't know about that. I never even laid eyes on Mrs. Connor."

"You haven't been missing much."

There was a yell outside, a kind of choked ululation. It sounded as much like an animal as a man. It was Green. When I reached the door, he was climbing out of his convertible with a heavy blue revolver in his hand.

"I saw the killer," he cried out exultantly.

"Where?"

He waved the revolver toward the lumberyard across the road. "He poked his head up behind that pile of white pine. When he saw me, he ran like a deer. I'm going to get him."

"No. Give me the gun."

"Why? I got a license to carry it. And use it."

He started across the four-lane highway, dodging through the moving patterns of the Sunday traffic as if he were playing parcheesi on the kitchen table at home. The sounds of brakes and curses split the air. He had scrambled over the locked gate of the yard before I got to it. I went over after him.

Green disappeared behind a pile of lumber. I turned the corner and saw him running halfway down a long aisle walled with stacked wood and floored with beaten earth. The old man of the mountain was running ahead of him. His white hair blew in the wind of his own movement. A burlap sack bounced on his shoulders like a load of sorrow and shame.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" Green cried.

The old man ran on as if the devil himself were after him. He came to a cyclone fence, discarded his sack, and tried to climb it. He almost got over. Three strands of barbed wire along the top of the fence caught and held him struggling.

I heard a tearing sound, and then the sound of a shot. The huge old body espaliered on the fence twitched and went limp, fell heavily to the earth. Green stood over him breathing through his teeth.

I pushed him out of the way. The old man was alive, though there was blood in his mouth. He spat it onto his chin when I lifted his head.

"You shouldn't ought to of done it. I come to turn myself in. Then I got ascairt."

"Why were you scared?"

"I watched you uncover the

little girl in the leaves. I knew I'd be blamed. I'm one of the chosen. They always blame the chosen. I been in trouble before."

"Trouble with girls?" At my shoulder Green was grinning terribly.

"Trouble with cops."

"For killing people?" Green said.

"For preaching on the street without a license. The voice told me to preach to the tribes of the wicked. And the voice told me this morning to come in and give my testimony."

"What voice?"

"The great voice." His voice was little and weak. He coughed red.

"He's as crazy as a bedbug," Green said.

"Shut up." I turned back to the dying man. "What testimony do you have to give?"

"About the car I seen. It woke me up in the middle of the night, stopped in the road below my sanctuary."

"What kind of car?"

"I don't know cars. I think it was one of them foreign cars. It made a noise to wake the dead."

"Did you see who was driving it?"

"No. I didn't go near. I was 'ascairt."

"What time was this car in the road?"

"I don't keep track of time. The moon was down behind the trees."

Those were his final words. He looked up at the sky with his sky-colored eyes, straight into the sun. His eyes changed color.

Green said, "Don't tell them. If you do, I'll make a liar out of you. I'm a respected citizen in this town. I got a business to lose. And they'll believe me ahead of you, mister."

"Shut up."

He couldn't. "The old fellow was lying, anyway. You know that. You heard him say yourself that he heard voices. That proves he's a psycho. He's a psycho killer. I shot him down like you would a mad dog, and I did right."

He waved the revolver.

"You did wrong, Green, and you know it. Give me that gun before it kills somebody else."

He thrust it into my hand suddenly. I unloaded it, breaking my fingernails in the process, and handed it back to him empty. He nudged up against me.

"Listen, maybe I did do wrong. I had provocation. It doesn't have to get out. I got a business to lose."

He fumbled in his hip pocket and brought out a thick sharkskin wallet. "Here. I can pay you good money. You say that you're a private eye; you know how to keep your lip buttoned."

I walked away and left him blabbering beside the body of the man he had killed. They were both vicious, in a sense, but only one of them had blood on his hands.

Miss Brocco was in the HP parking lot. Her bosom was jumping with excitement.

"I heard a shot."

"Green shot the old man. Dead. You better send in for the meat wagon and call off your bloody dogs."

The words hit her like slaps. She raised her hand to her face, defensively. "Are you mad at me? Why are you mad at me?"

"I'm mad at everybody."

"You still don't think he did it."

"I know damned well he didn't. I want to talk to your sister."

"Alice? What for?"

"Information. She was on the beach with Ginnie Green last night. She may be able to tell me something."

"You leave Alice alone."

"I'll treat her gently. Where do you live?"

"I don't want my little sister dragged into this filthy mess."

"All I want to know is who Ginnie paired off with."

"I'll ask Alice. I'll tell you."

"Come on, Miss Brocco, we're wasting time. I don't need your permission to talk to your sister, after all. I can get the address out of the phone book if I have to."

She flared up then and then flared down.

"You win. We live on Orlando Street, 224. That's on the other side of town. You will be nice to Alice, won't you? She's bothered enough as it is about Ginnie's death."

"She really was a friend of Ginnie's, then?"

"Yes. I tried to break it up. But you know how kids are—two motherless girls, they stick together. I tried to be like a mother to Alice."

"What happened to your own mother?"

"Father—I mean, she died." A greenish pallor invaded her face and turned it to old bronze. "Please. I don't want to talk about it. I was only a kid when she died."

She went back to her muttering radios. She was quite a woman, I thought as I drove away. Nubile but unmarried, probably full of untapped Mediterranean passions. If she worked an eight-hour shift and started at eight, she'd be getting off about four.

It wasn't a large town, and it wasn't far across it. The highway doubled as its main street. I passed the Union High

School. On the green playing field beside it a lot of kids in mortarboards and gowns were rehearsing their graduation exercises. A kind of pall seemed to hang over the field. Perhaps it was in my mind.

Farther along the street I passed Green's Highway Restaurant. A dozen cars stood in its parking space. A couple of white-uniformed waitresses were scooting around behind the plate-glass windows.

Orlando Street was a lower-middle-class residential street bisected by the highway. Jacaranda trees bloomed like low small purple clouds among its stucco and frame cottages. Fallen purple petals carpeted the narrow lawn in front of the Brocco house.

A thin dark man, wiry under his T-shirt, was washing a small red Fiat in the driveway beside the front porch. He must have been over fifty, but his long hair was as black as an Indian's. His Sicilian nose was humped in the middle by an old break.

"Mr. Brocco?"

"That's me."

"Is Alice home?"

"She's home."

"I'd like to speak to her."

He turned off his hose, pointing its dripping nozzle at me like a gun.

"You're a little old for her, ain't you?"

"I'm a detective investigatin the death of Ginnie Green."

"Alice don't know nothin about that."

"I've just been talking t your older daughter at th Highway Patrol office. Sh thinks Alice may know something."

He shifted on his feet. "Well if Anita says it's all right."

"It's okay, Dad," a girl sai from the front door. "Anit just called me on the telephone Come in, Mister—Archer, isn' it?"

"Archer."

She opened the screen doo for me. It opened directly int a small square living room containing worn green frieze furniture and a television set which the girl switched off. She was a handsome, serious-looking girl, a younger version of he sister with ten years and ten pounds subtracted and a pony tail added. She sat down gravely on the edge of a chair, waving he hand at the chesterfield. He movements were languid. There were blue depressions under he eyes. Her face was sallow.

"What kind of questions do you want to ask me? My sister didn't say."

"Who was Ginnie with last night?"

"Nobody. I mean, she was with me. She didn't make out with any of the boys." She glanced from me to the blind television set, as if she felt caught between. "It said on the television that she was with a man, that there was medical evidence to prove it. But I didn't see her with no man. Any man."

"Did Ginnie go with men?"

She shook her head. Her pony tail switched and hung limp. She was close to tears.

"You told Anita she did."

"I did not!"

"Your sister wouldn't lie. You passed on a rumor to her—a high school rumor that Ginnie had had something to do with one man in particular."

The girl was watching my face in fascination. Her eyes were like a bird's eyes, bright and shallow and fearful.

"Was the rumor true?"

She shrugged her thin shoulders. "How would I know?"

"You were good friends with Ginnie."

"Yes. I was." Her voice broke on the past tense. "She was a real nice kid, even if she was kind of boy crazy."

"She was boy crazy, but she didn't make out with any of the boys last night?"

"Not while I was there."

"Did she make out with Mr. Connor?"

"No. He wasn't there. He went away. He said he was going home. He lives up the beach."

"What did Ginnie do?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice."

"You said she was with you. Was she with you all evening?"

"Yes." Her face was agonized. "I mean no."

"Did Ginnie go away, too?"

She nodded.

"In the same direction Mr. Conner took? The direction of his house?"

Her head moved almost imperceptibly downward.

"What time was that, Alice?"

"About eleven o'clock, I guess."

"And Ginnie never came back from Mr. Connor's house?"

"I don't know. I don't know for certain that she went there."

"But Ginnie and Mr. Connor were good friends?"

"I guess so."

"How good? Like a boy friend and a girl friend?"

She sat mute, her birdlike stare unblinking.

"Tell me, Alice."

"I'm afraid."

"Afraid of Mr. Connor?"

"No. Not him."

"Has someone threatened you—told you not to talk?"

Her head moved in another barely perceptible nod.

"Who threatened you, Alice? You'd better tell me for your own protection. Whoever did threaten you is probably a murderer."

She burst into frantic tears. Brocco came to the door.

"What goes on in here?"

"Your daughter is upset. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, and I know who upset her. You better get out of here or you'll be sorrier."

He opened the screen door and held it open, his head poised like a dark and broken ax. I went out past him. He spat after me. The Broccos were a very emotional family.

I started back toward Connor's beach house on the south side of town but ran into a diversion on the way. Green's car was parked in the lot beside his restaurant. I went in.

The place smelled of grease. It was almost full of late Sunday lunchers seated in booths and at the U-shaped breakfast bar in the middle. Green himself was sitting on a stool behind the cash register counting money. He was counting it as if his life and his hope of heaven depended on the colored paper in his hands.

He looked up, smiling loosely and vaguely. "Yes, sir?" Then he recognized me. His face went through a quick series of transformations and settled for a kind of boozy shame. "I know I shouldn't be here working on a day like this. But it keeps my mind off my troubles. Besides, they steal you blind if you don't watch 'em. And I'll be needing the money."

"What for, Mr. Green?"

"The trial." He spoke the word as if it gave him a bitter satisfaction.

"Whose trial?"

"Mine. I told the sheriff what the old guy said. And what I did. I know what I did. I shot him down like a dog, and I had no right to. I was crazy with my sorrow, you might say."

He was less crazy now. The shame in his eyes was clearing. But the sorrow was still there in their depths, like stone at the bottom of a well.

"I'm glad you told the truth, Mr. Green."

"So am I. It doesn't help him, and it doesn't bring Ginnie back. But at least I can live with myself."

"Speaking of Ginnie," I said. "Was she seeing quite a lot of Frank Connor?"

"Yeah. I guess you could say so. He came over to help her with her studies quite a few times. At the house, and at the library. He didn't charge me, either."

"That was nice of him. Was

Ginnie fond of Connor?"

"Sure she was. She thought very highly of Mr. Connor."

"Was she in love with him?"

"In love? Hell, I never thought of anything like that. Why?"

"Did she have dates with Connor?"

"Not to my knowledge," he said. "If she did, she must have done it behind my back." His eyes narrowed to two red swollen slits. "You think Frank Connor had something to do with her death?"

"It's a possibility. Don't go into a sweat now. You know where that gets you."

"Don't worry. But what about this Connor? Did you get something on him? I thought he was acting queer last night."

"Queer in what way?"

"Well, he was pretty tight when he came to the house. I gave him a stiff snort, and that straightened him out for a while. But later on, down on the beach, he got almost hysterical. He was running around like a rooster with his head chopped off."

"Is he a heavy drinker?"

"I wouldn't know. I never saw him drink before last night at my house." Green narrowed his eyes. "But he tossed down a triple bourbon like it was water. And remember this morning, he offered us a drink on the beach. A drink in the morning, that isn't the usual thing, especially for a high school teacher."

"I noticed that."

"What else have you been noticing?"

"We won't go into it now," I said. "I don't want to ruin a man unless and until I'm sure he's got it coming."

He sat on his stool with his head down. Thought moved murkily under his knitted brows. His glance fell on the money in his hands. He was counting tens.

"Listen, Mr. Archer. You're working on this case on your own, aren't you? For free?"

"So far."

"So go to work for me. Nail Connor for me and I'll pay you whatever you ask."

"Not so fast," I said. "We don't know that Connor is guilty. There are other possibilities."

"Such as?"

"If I tell you, can I trust you not to go on a shooting spree?"

"Don't worry," he repeated. "I've had that."

"Where's your revolver?"

"I turned it in to Sheriff Pearsall. He asked for it."

We were interrupted by a family group getting up from one of the booths. They gave Green their money and their sympathy. When they were out of hearing, I said, "You mentioned that your daughter worked here in the restaurant for a while. Was Al Brocco working here at the same time?"

"Yeah. He's been my night cook for six-seven years. Al is a darned good cook. He trained as a chef on the Italian line." His slow mind, punchy with grief, did a double-take. "You wouldn't be saying that he messed around with Ginnie?"

"I'm asking you."

"Shucks, Al is old enough to be her father. He's all wrapped up in his own girls, Anita in particular. He worships the ground she walks on. She's the mainspring of that family."

"How did he get on with Ginnie?"

"Very well. They kidded back and forth. She was the only one who could ever make him smile. Al is a sad man, you know. He had a tragedy in his life."

"His wife's death?"

"It was worse than that," Green said. "Al Brocco killed his wife with his own hand. He caught her with another man and put a knife in her."

"And he's walking around loose?"

"The other man was a Mex," Green said in an explanatory way. "A wetback. He couldn't even talk the English language. The town hardly blamed Al, the jury gave him manslaughter. But when he got out of the pen, the people at the Pink Flamingo wouldn't give him his old job back—he used to be chef there. So I took him on. I felt sorry for his girls, I guess, and Al's been a good worker. A man doesn't do a thing like that twice, you know."

He did another slow mental double-take. His mouth hung open.

"Let's hope not."

"Listen here," he said. "You go to work for me, eh? You nail the guy, whoever he is. I'll pay you. I'll pay you now. How much do you want?"

I took a hundred dollars of his money and left him trying to comfort himself with the rest of it. The smell of grease stayed in my nostrils.

Connor's house clung to the edge of a low bluff about halfway between the HP station and the mouth of the canyon where the thing had begun: a semi-centilevered redwood cottage with a closed double garage fronting the highway. From the grape stake-fenced patio in the angle between the garage and the front door a flight of wooden steps climbed to the flat roof which was railed as a sun deck. A second set of steps descended the fifteen or twenty feet to the beach.

I tripped on a pair of garden shears crossing the patio to the garage window. I peered into the interior twilight. Two things inside interested me: a dismasted flattie sitting on a trailer, and a car. The sailboat interested me because its cordage resembled the white rope that had strangled Ginnie. The car interested me because it was an imported model, a low-slung Triumph two-seater.

I was planning to have a closer look at it when a woman's voice screeched overhead like a gull's, "What do you think you're doing?"

Mrs. Connor was leaning over the railing on the roof. Her hair was in curlers. She looked like a blonde Gorgon. I smiled up at her, the way that Greek whose name I don't remember must have smiled.

"Your husband invited me for a drink, remember? I don't know whether he gave me a rain check or not."

"He did not! Go away! My husband is sleeping!"

"Shh. You'll wake him up. You'll wake up the people in Forest Lawn."

She put her hand to her mouth. From the expression on her face she seemed to be biting her hand. She disappeared for a moment, and then came down the steps with a multicolored silk scarf over her curlers. The rest of her was sheathed in a white satin bathing suit. Against it her flesh looked like brown wood.

"You get out of here," she said. "Or I shall call the police."

"Fine. Call them. I've got nothing to hide."

"Are you implying that we have?"

"We'll see. Why did you leave your husband?"

"That's none of your business."

"I'm making it my business, Mrs. Connor. I'm a detective investigating the murder of Ginnie Green. Did you leave Frank on account of Ginnie Green?"

"No. No! I wasn't even aware—" Her hand went to her mouth again. She chewed on it some more.

"You weren't aware that Frank was having an affair with Ginnie Green?"

"He wasn't."

"So you say. Others say different."

"What others? Anita Brocco? You can't believe anything *that* woman says. Why, her own father is a murderer, everybody in town knows that."

"Your own husband may be another, Mrs. Connor. You might as well come clean with me."

"But I have nothing to tell you."

"You can tell me why you left him."

"That is a private matter, between Frank and me. It has nothing to do with anybody but us." She was calming down, setting her moral forces in a stubborn, defensive posture.

"There's usually only the one reason."

"I had my reasons. I said they were none of your business. I chose for reasons of my own to spend a month with my parents in Long Beach."

"When did you come back?"

"This morning."

"Why this morning?"

"Frank called me. He said he needed me." She touched her thin breast absently, pathetically, as if perhaps she hadn't been needed in the past.

"Needed you for what?"

"As his wife," she said. "He said there might be tr—" Her hand went to her mouth again. She said around it, "Trouble."

"Did he name the kind of trouble?"

"No."

"What time did he call you?"

"Very early, around seven o'clock."

"That was more than an hour before I found Ginnie's body."

"He knew she was missing. He spent the whole night looking for her."

"Why would he do that, Mrs. Connor?"

"She was his student. He was fond of her. Besides, he was more or less responsible for her."

"Responsible for her death?"

"How dare you say a thing like that?"

"If he dared to do it, I can dare to say it."

"He didn't!" she cried. "Frank is a good man. He may have his faults, but he wouldn't kill anyone. I know him."

"What are his faults?"

"We won't discuss them."

"Then may I have a look in your garage?"

"What for? What are you looking for?"

"I'll know when I find it." I turned toward the garage door.

"You mustn't go in there," she said intensely. "Not without Frank's permission."

"Wake him up and we'll get his permission."

"I will not. He got no sleep last night."

"Then I'll just have a look without his permission."

"I'll kill you if you go in there."

She picked up the garden shears and brandished them at me—a sick-looking lioness defending her overgrown cub. The cub himself opened the front door of the cottage. He slouched in the doorway groggily, naked except for white shorts.

"What goes on, Stella?"

"This man has been making the most horrible accusations."

His blurred glance wavered between us and focused on her. "What did he say?"

"I won't repeat it."

"I will, Mr. Connor. I think you were Ginnie Green's lover, if that's the word. I think she followed you to this house last night, around midnight. I think she left it with a rope around her neck."

Connor's head jerked. He started to make a move in my direction. Something inhibited it, like an invisible leash. His body slanted toward me, static, all the muscles taut. It resembled an anatomy specimen with the skin off. Even his face seemed mostly bone and teeth.

I hoped he'd swing on me and let me hit him. He didn't. Stella Connor dropped the garden shears. They made a noise like the dull clank of doom.

"Aren't you going to deny it, Frank?"

"I didn't kill her. I swear I didn't. I admit that we—that we were together last night, Ginnie and I."

"Ginnie and I?" the woman repeated incredulously.

His head hung down. "I'm sorry, Stella. I didn't want to hurt you more than I have already. But it has to come out. I took up with the girl after you left. I was lonely and feeling sorry for myself. Ginnie kept hanging around. One night I drank too much and let it happen. It happened more than once. I was so flattered that a pretty young girl—"

"You fool!" she said in a deep harsh voice.

"Yes, I'm a moral fool. That's no surprise to you, is it?"

"I thought you respected your pupils, at least. You mean to say you brought her into our own house, into our own bed?"

"You'd left. It wasn't ours any more. Besides, she came of her own accord. She wanted to come. She loved me."

She said with grinding contempt, "You poor groveling ninny. And to think you had the gall to ask me to come back here, to make you look respectable."

I cut in between them. "Was she here last night, Connor?"

"She was here. I didn't invite her. I wanted her to come, but I dreaded it, too. I knew that I was taking an awful chance. I drank quite a bit to numb my conscience—"

"What conscience?" Stella Connor said.

"I have a conscience," he said without looking at her. "You don't know the hell I've been going through. After she came, after it happened last night, I drank myself unconscious."

"Do you mean after you killed her?" I said.

"I didn't kill her. When I passed out, she was perfectly all right. She was sitting up drinking a cup of instant coffee. The next thing I knew, hours later, her father was on the telephone and she was gone."

"Are you trying to pull the old blackout alibi? You'll have to do better than that."

"I can't. It's the truth."

"Let me into your garage."

He seemed almost glad to be given an order, a chance for some activity. The garage wasn't locked. He raised the overhead door and let the daylight into the interior. It smelled of paint. There were empty cans of marine paint on a bench beside the sailboat. Its hull gleamed virgin white.

"I painted my flattie last week," he said inconsequentially.

"You do a lot of sailing?"

"I used to. Not much lately."

"No," his wife said from the doorway. "Frank changed his hobby to women. Wine and women."

"Lay off, eh?" His voice was pleading.

She looked at him from a great and stony distance.

I walked around the boat, examining the cordage. The starboard jib line had been sheared off short. Comparing it with the port line, I found that the missing piece was approximately a yard long. That was the length of the piece of white rope that I was interested in.

"Hey!" Connor grabbed the end of the cut line. He fingered it as if it was a wound in his own flesh. "Who's been messing with my lines? Did you cut it, Stella?"

"I never go near your blessed boat," she said.

"I can tell you where the rest of that line is, Connor. A line of similar length and color and thickness was wrapped around Ginnie Green's neck when I found her."

"Surely you don't believe I put it there?"

I tried to, but I couldn't. Small-boat sailers don't cut their jib lines, even when they're contemplating murder. And while Connor was clearly no genius, he was smart enough to have known that the line could easily be traced to him. Perhaps someone else had been equally smart.

I turned to Mrs. Connor. She

was standing in the doorway with her legs apart. Her body was almost black against the daylight. Her eyes were hooded by the scarf on her head.

"What time did you get home, Mrs. Connor?"

"About ten o'clock this morning. I took a bus as soon as my husband called. But I'm in no position to give him an alibi."

"An alibi wasn't what I had in mind. I suggest another possibility—that you came home twice. You came home unexpectedly last night, saw the girl in the house with your husband, waited in the dark till the girl came out, waited with a piece of rope in your hands—a piece of rope you'd cut from your husband's boat in the hope of getting him punished for what he'd done to you. But the picture doesn't fit the frame, Mrs. Connor. A sailor like your husband wouldn't cut a piece of line from his own boat. And even in the heat of murder he wouldn't tie a granny's knot. His fingers would automatically tie a reef knot. That isn't true of a woman's fingers."

She held herself upright with one long rigid arm against the door frame.

"I wouldn't do anything like that. I wouldn't do that to Frank."

"Maybe you wouldn't in daylight, Mrs. Connor. Things have different shapes at midnight."

"And hell hath no fury like a woman scorned? Is that what you're thinking? You're wrong. I wasn't here last night. I was in bed in my father's house in Long Beach. I didn't even know about that girl and Frank."

"Then why did you leave him?"

"He was in love with another woman. He wanted to divorce me and marry her. But he was afraid—afraid that it would affect his position in town. He told me on the phone this morning that it was all over with the other woman. So I agreed to come back to him." Her arm dropped on her side.

"He said that it was all over with Ginnie?"

Possibilities were racing through my mind. There was the possibility that Connor had been playing reverse English, deliberately and clumsily framing himself in order to be cleared. But that was out of far left field.

"Not Ginnie," his wife said. "The other woman was Anita Brocco. He met her last spring in the course of work and fell in love—what *he* calls in love. My husband is a foolish, fickle man."

"Please, Stella. I said it was

all over between me and Anita, and it is."

She turned on him in quiet savagery. "What does it matter now? If it isn't one girl it's another. Any kind of female flesh will do to poultice your sick little ego."

Her cruelty struck inward and hurt her. She stretched out her hand toward him. Suddenly her eyes were blind with tears.

"Any flesh but mine, Frank," she said brokenly.

Connor paid no attention.

He said to me in a hushed voice, "My God, I never thought. I noticed her car last night when I was walking home along the beach."

"Whose car?"

"Anita's red Fiat. It was parked at the viewpoint a few hundred yards from here." He gestured vaguely toward town. "Later, when Ginnie was with me, I thought I heard someone in the garage. But I was too drunk to make a search." His eyes burned into mine. "You say a woman tied that knot?"

"All we can do is ask her."

We started toward my car together. His wife called after him, "Don't go, Frank. Let him handle it."

He hesitated, a weak man caught between opposing forces.

"I need you," she said. "We need each other."

I pushed him in her direction.

It was nearly four when I got to the HP station. The patrol cars had gathered like homing pigeons for the change in shift. Their uniformed drivers were talking and laughing inside.

Anita Brocco wasn't among them. A male dispatcher, a fat-faced man with pimples, had taken her place behind the counter.

"Where's Miss Brocco?" I asked.

"In the Ladies' Room. Her father is coming to pick her up any minute."

She came out wearing lipstick and a light beige coat. Her face turned beige when she saw my face. She came toward me in slow motion, leaned with both hands flat on the counter. Her lipstick looked like fresh blood on a corpse.

"You're a handsome woman, Anita," I said. "Too bad about you."

"Too bad." It was half a statement and half a question. She looked down at her hands.

"Your fingernails are clean now. They were dirty this morning. You were digging in the dirt in the dark last night, weren't you?"

"No."

"You were, though. You saw them together and you couldn't stand it. You waited in ambush with a rope, and put it around her neck. Around your own neck, too."

She touched her neck. The talk and laughter had subsided around us. I could hear the tick of the clock again, and the muttering signals coming in from inner space.

"What did you use to cut the rope with, Anita? The garden shears?"

Her red mouth groped for words and found them. "I was crazy about him. She took him away. It was all over before it started. I didn't know what to do with myself. I wanted him to suffer."

"He's suffering. He's going to suffer more."

"He deserves to. He was the only man—" She shrugged in a twisted way and looked down at her breast. "I didn't want to kill her, but when I saw them together—I saw them through the window. I saw her take off her clothes and put them on. Then I thought of the night my father—when he—when there was all the blood in Mother's bed. I had to wash it out of the sheets."

The men around me were murmuring. One of them, a sergeant, raised his voice.

"Did you kill Ginnie Green?"

"Yes."

"Are you ready to make a statement?" I said.

"Yes. I'll talk to Sheriff Pearsall. I don't want to talk here, in front of my friends." She looked around doubtfully.

"I'll take you downtown."

"Wait a minute." She glanced once more at her empty hands. "I left my purse in the—in the back room. I'll go and get it."

She crossed the office like a zombie, opened a plain door, closed it behind her. She didn't come out. After a while we broke the lock and went in after her.

Her body was cramped on the narrow floor. The ivory-handled nail file lay by her right hand. There were bloody holes in her white blouse and in the white breast under it. One of them had gone as deep as her heart.

Later Al Brocco drove up in her red Fiat and came into the station.

"I'm a little late," he said to the room in general. "Anita wanted me to give her car a good cleaning. Where is she, anyway?"

The sergeant cleared his throat to answer Brocco.

All us poor creatures, as the old man of the mountain had said that morning.

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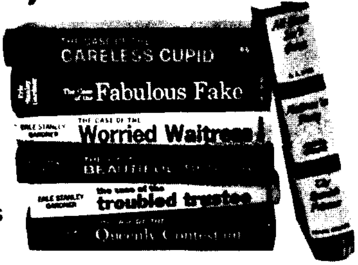
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